

My Big Sister

LIVES IN A
FANTASY
WORLD

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Illust. An2A

7

THE WORLD'S STRONGEST
LITTLE BROTHER VS. THE EVIL GOD?!



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**"WHO DO YOU
THINK I AM?
I'M THE LITTLE
BROTHER OF
MUTSUKO
SAKAKI, THAT
BIG SISTER
WHO LIVES IN
A FANTASY
WORLD, AND
MY NAME IS
YUICHI!"**

**My Big
Sister**

**LIVES IN A
FANTASY
WORLD**

**THE WORLD'S STRONGEST LITTLE
BROTHER VS. THE EVIL GOD?!**

7



**"WHAT
ARE YOU
DOING,
SIS?"**

Yuichi Sakaki

Protagonist. The world's
strongest little brother.

Mutsuko was siding with the enemy?
The premise seemed so unreal,
it was making his head spin.

Ende

An Outer. She enjoys
meddling in the Divine
Vessels War.

Hiromichi Rokuhara

A participant in the Divine Vessels War.
He stole Soul Reader from Yuichi.

**"JUST
HAND
OVER THE
DIVINE
VESSEL
AND I
WON'T
HURT
YOU!"**

Mutsuko Sakaki

Yuichi's big sister.
Lives in a fantasy world.

**ALTHOUGH
IF YOU
WANT A
FIGHT,
WE'RE
RARING
TO GO!"**



**HE WAS
ANGRY.**

**THE
MOMENT
HE HAD
SEEN HIS
SISTER
THERE,
THIS HAD
BECOME
YUICHI'S
PERSONAL
FIGHT.**

**HE WAS
GOING TO
CRUSH
THE ONES
WHO HAD
DONE
THIS TO
HIS BIG
SISTER.**



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Prologue: The “Protagonist” Finished His Training, and Now He’s Kind of Crazy

It was a space full of books and bookshelves: a study, perhaps, or a library. But if that’s was what it was, there was something strange about it.

The books had been treated with total carelessness. Those that couldn’t fit on the shelves had been stacked into piles with no rhyme or reason. Even some of the bookshelves themselves had been knocked over.

At a glance, one might think the place was long abandoned... but this place was alive. This place had a master.

Atop one carelessly piled stack of books sat a girl.

Her name was Ende.

Her hair was red, and she wore a high school uniform.

She was reading a book, as she always was. This particular book was about a subject she had been very interested in lately: the Divine Vessels War.

The Evil God who was trying to destroy the world and the Outers who enjoyed watching the world as observers were natural enemies. Thus, the Outers and the Evil God had fought, and the Evil God had lost. But the Outers, who could never quite take anything seriously, hadn’t been satisfied with his destruction.

They had sealed the Evil God and split his body up into individual parts known as the Divine Vessels. In that way, even if the

Evil God was sealed, he would never fully lose his ability to influence the world.

Thus, the Evil God cast bait.

He set rules: if the Vessels were brought together, he would revive and grant any wish.

The Divine Vessels would take hosts that were humanoid beings, bequeathing them power. Then they would resonate to communicate their location to the other hosts. These hosts would fight each other until one stood victorious; then the Evil God would revive only to be sealed again.

That cycle had repeated over and over again, right up until the present day.

Now, the Divine Vessels War Ende was participating in was reaching its final stage.

The book Ende was reading was describing what had happened so far. This was Ende's ability: to cause descriptions of current events to be written in her books.

According to the book, five major factions had Divine Vessels. Though generally, even if you lost a fight and had your vessel stolen, as long as you were still alive, you could get a chance to take it back. The only thing that mattered was having all the Divine Vessels at the very end, which meant there were probably other contenders besides those five waiting in the wings for a chance to seize victory.

"Of course, it would be hard to challenge a Divine Vessel host without having a Divine Vessel of your own," Ende murmured.

"But I effectively don't have one myself, do I?" A brazen voice interrupted Ende's monologue.

"I expected you to take an hour, but I think you finished it a

little faster than that,” Ende said, but as there was no clock in her library, she was going completely from her gut.

Ende looked up from her book.

A boy was standing there, the label “Protagonist” hanging over his head.

This was Ryoma Takei, the participant that Ende had chosen so that she could meddle in the war. He had a trait that caused him to be caught up in all sorts of strange incidents, as well as the ability to resolve those incidents as if he were the protagonist of their stories. He was, in effect, an avatar of plot convenience, and she had decided to make use of this.

“You’ve grown a bit savage, haven’t you?” Ende commented.

It had taken Ende a minute to even recognize him. Though his physical appearance hadn’t changed much, he seemed like a different person.

The place Ende had sent Ryoma for training had effectively been a psychological realm where he would fight mock battles. It was only natural, then, that his physical appearance hadn’t changed, since he hadn’t been affected physically.

What was different was the way he carried himself. There was an aura of violence about him that made him seem like a different person.

“Like it’s not your fault that this happened,” he sulked, suggesting he had been through an extremely rough time.

“I told you before that your Divine Vessel wouldn’t be of any use to you,” she said.

The ability of the Divine Vessel that Ryoma was playing host to was ridiculous: it gave him the ability to see the number of books a person had read in their lifetime hanging over their head.

It was difficult to imagine it ever being useful in combat; the absolute best Ende could think of was that if you ran into someone with a power-stealing ability, you could temporarily confuse them by making them steal it.

“Yeah, I’m definitely convinced of its uselessness now,” Ryoma agreed, suggesting that he actually had tried to make use of it. If he’d been forced to resort to that, she thought, the trial he’d been through must really have been a grueling one.

“So, were you able to find a way to win?” she asked.

“Have you ever thought it was strange that when good and evil fight, good always wins?”

His response sounded like a non sequitur, but Ende decided to engage him anyway. It might have some connection to what Ryoma had worked out in his training.

“It’s a bit of a cliché, but isn’t that more of a history-books-written-by-the-winners kind of thing?”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” he said. “Think about tokusatsu, anime, light novels. You run into situations where it feels weird that the protagonist wins, right? There are lots of things the good guys can’t do, while the bad guys can do anything. As long as they’re not held back by morality, they should dominate easily. But the bad guys never go through with it. Why is that?”

“Oh, is that what you’re getting at?” Ende said. “Well, that’s the reason I chose you, after all.”

“Yeah. The world is designed to conform to the protagonist. The enemy won’t use an attack the protagonist can’t bounce back from, and even if they attack them early in the story, they’ll always find a reason to leave without finishing them off. The kidnapped love interest usually gets off unscathed, too.”

Ryoma was a protagonist, an avatar of plot convenience. The purpose of the training was to get him to realize that, and it seemed to have worked.

“No matter how strong the opponent, or how desperate the situation, it doesn’t matter. Even if they’re a million times stronger, even if they have the power to blow out the sun, even if they’re so strong they can inspire terror with a single glance, that’s all just background noise. It has no effect on who wins.”

“Well, desperate situations are popular in stories nowadays, but people do get rather tired if they drag on for too long,” Ende said. “So, what does determine who wins?”

“In the end, whoever the writer wants to win will win. That’s all it comes down to in the end.” Ryoma was brimming with confidence. He must have thought he had glimpsed the truth of the world.

“Ahh, this has gotten a bit weird. I think we’ve gone in a meta direction,” Ende said.

Ryoma’s deduction was a misunderstanding that Outers and those who learned about worldviews commonly fell into. Ende compared the various worldviews to stories herself, but to her, that was nothing but a metaphor. She had never thought that by thinking of the world as a fabrication, and yourself as a character in that world, that you could deny the world itself.

There shouldn’t be any way to deny it. It was just like the story of the butterfly’s dream.

“Well, never mind that,” she said. “If you’re aware of your ‘Protagonist’ status, that’s impressive by itself. Now what, concretely, did you acquire?”

“Oh, you mean these?” Ryoma held out his hand and murmured something. Five cards appeared in his hand.

“Wow. You awakened an Outer ability?” she said. “I see. I guess it is protagonist-like to awaken mysterious abilities when it’s convenient.”

Ryoma was not, precisely, an Outer, but he certainly resembled one. He could exist outside of the destiny he’d be born into, and get involved in the destiny of others without realizing it.

“Plot convenience doesn’t mean that the story always proceeds in ways convenient for the protagonist,” he told her. “It means, more precisely, that events will conveniently occur to move the story in the direction the writer wants it to go. Which means I don’t actually know if things are proceeding in my favor, do I?”

“That’s true,” Ende said. There are unlucky protagonists out there where nothing they do works out, and they always end up at rock bottom. So how do you use those cards?”

Ende looked and saw that all the cards had the same pattern to them. They probably had two sides.

“These are event cards,” he said. “They let me choose what’s going to happen next.”

As he spoke, Ryoma pulled out one card and released it into the air. The card glowed, then disappeared, and it told those standing there what had been written on it.

“Event: Little sister Shiori Takei is killed by Enemy X.”

Ryoma released another card. He ended up with five cards again, which suggested that after he used one, it was restocked.

“Event: Big sister Kotori Takei is killed by Enemy X.”

“Event: Childhood friend Mio Morikawa is killed by Enemy X.”

“Combo Event: All close friends and relatives are killed.”

“Special Event: Anger-based awakening.”

“I see,” Ende said. “So you can actively meddle in the story. But this seems a bit drastic, killing off all your leading ladies. Not that I’m one to talk, seeing as I sent you down that road...”

“Huh? What are you talking about? I didn’t kill them.” Ryoma looked at her in confusion.

“Huh? Is that how it seems to you?” Ende felt a moment of hesitation upon realizing the degree to which she seemed to have broken him. She had been hoping he’d pick up a certain degree of determination, but he’d gone so far that it seemed to have had the opposite effect.

“My sisters and childhood friend weren’t leading ladies, they were just bait to make the story more exciting,” he explained. “Besides, if I ever need them, I can just trigger a resurrection event, right?”

It was a statement that called his protagonist potential into question, yet Ende smiled. She was a bit anxious, but it was unlikely that any monster could beat someone who had shaken off his restraints to this degree. If he could use his protagonist advantage to its fullest, there was a chance he could win the Divine Vessels War.

“But ‘Enemy X’ and ‘awakening’ and stuff... it’s all a bit vague, isn’t it?” Ende asked.

“Eh, the details can be filled in later.”

Perhaps those were the sorts of details that were filled in later. Right now, they existed in a state of infinite overlapping possibilities.

“Well, it’ll be a little lonely without any love interests around,” Ende said.

“I have plenty of love interests, though.”

Ende thought he must be referring to the many girls he’d saved during his long career.

“Why do I need to haul around that old-fashioned group with me?” he added. “They were fine for what they were, but I can’t have them butting in all the time. Besides, a new love interest always shows up when it’s time for a new arc.”

“Hmm, it might sound a little strange coming from me, but are you sure about this?” Ende asked. She wondered if she’d driven him too far. It was like his personality had completely changed. It was hard to imagine him as a protagonist anymore.

But perhaps that was only natural. After all, he’d been forced to die tens of thousands of times in the course of less than an hour. It might have been too much to hope that he’d remain sane.

“Ah, well. Maybe that’s what it means to become strong. By the way, do you remember our original objective?” Ende asked, feeling a bit nervous now. Now that Ryoma had so much power, he might not care about the Divine Vessels War anymore.

“Of course I do. I’ll gather the Divine Vessels, make my wish, and get myself a peaceful, normal life where nobody bothers me.”

She had a feeling he’d gone too far to ever return to a normal life now, but it would be no use to point that out, so Ende decided to continue. “Well, good. By the way, have I told you about Yuichi Sakaki? He’ll likely be your strongest opponent, so you should beat him first.”

Ryoma barely seemed to be listening to Ende as he examined his five cards. He seemed entirely focused on picking his love interest. “Why’s that? Does he have some really great Divine Vessel?”

“He’s an ordinary human, just a kind of dangerous sort,” she said.

Having lost Soul Reader, and with no Divine Vessel hosted in him, Yuichi didn’t have any special powers. But if one got mixed up in his sister Mutsuko’s world, there was a very good chance that they could lose before they even figured out what was happening.

“I’ll pass on the serial killer,” Ryoma said dismissively. “How can a serial killer even be a love interest? And a web novel author? Do they make love interests like that now?”

“There’s been demand for creative types for a while,” Ende said. “Now I wonder... am I included in those?”

“There’s no demand for bossy tomboy love interests,” Ryoma said.

“How insulting. In this one instant, you’ve made a few enemies, you know?”

“Let’s see, a vampire?” he mused. “That’s silly. Way too cliché nowadays. Out of these, then, I guess I’ll take this one.”

Ignoring Ende’s grumblings, Ryoma tossed a card into the air.

“Event: Love interest appears. A hero girl falls from the sky.”

“Heroes and falling from the sky are both pretty cliché too, but there didn’t seem to be anything better.” Ryoma laughed dryly, and the effect of the ability activated immediately.

A black hole opened in the ceiling of Ende’s library.

A girl fell from it, and Ryoma hurried to catch her.

“Amazing... it really takes effect that quickly?” Ende was impressed. When an Outer controlled destiny, they basically had to

nudge the related entities into place over time, but Ryoma's ability was completely direct, influencing the principles of causality themselves.

“Huh? Where am I? Who are you?” The girl looked all around her.

“Who are *you*? None of this makes any sense!” Even Ryoma, who caught the girl, seemed confused by her sudden appearance.



“Hmm? Maybe he’s crazy after all,” Ende said to herself.

Ryoma had lost all of the menacing atmosphere that had been hanging around him previously. It was as if he didn’t even remember manipulating events. It seemed his mental state really had become unstable.

“Anyway, we’ve gotta run!” the girl cried. “That’s the exit to the dungeon, but I don’t know how to close it, and monsters are coming out!”

“Huh?” As Ryoma stared at her, dumbfounded, something else dropped from the ceiling.

It was a child with dark red skin and horns on his head. He was followed by several other strange creatures that could only be described as monsters.

Ryoma let out a cry of surprise, and, still carrying the girl, ran off at top speed.

“Huh? Did he just run off without me?” Ende hadn’t foreseen this development at all.

Chapter 1: Soul Reader Got Stolen, But It Doesn't Change Much

Yuichi Sakaki stood in the hotel lobby, facing off with an older student from his school, Hiromichi Rokuhara.

Hiromichi was a slender boy with a sullen atmosphere to him. Yuichi had run into him after they'd returned to the surface after saving Natsuki in the underground.

Behind Yuichi stood three girls and one golden-furred cat: his big sister Mutsuko, his classmate Natsuki Takeuchi, “serial god killer” Aki Takizawa, and his classmate Yuri Konishi — she was the cat.

Hiromichi was standing a ways away, grinning. They hadn't drawn much attention from the people in the lobby yet. There had been a bit of movement between them — Hiromichi had swung a hand at Yuichi and then quickly backed off — but most people probably just interpreted it as high school students goofing around.

Yuichi couldn't see labels above anyone's heads right now. Soul Reader, his ability to identify other people's roles in life, was not functioning.

Something strange was going on.

But Yuichi immediately regained his cool. He checked his body's condition, but sensed nothing physically wrong, besides a bit of the standard exhaustion that came from using the fukami.

In other words, the lack of Soul Reader was the only issue.

So, what should I do? he wondered.

It had happened after Hiromichi took a swing at him, which suggested Hiromichi was behind it.

Yuichi put up his guard. He didn't know what Hiromichi had done, exactly, but he knew that he had to be careful.

"Oh? So it's called Soul Reader, huh?" Hiromichi said mockingly. "I knew you had to have something, so I tried taking it, but I guess it was a miss."

Yuichi didn't know why the guy was going out of his way to narrate his thoughts out loud, but it did tell him a few things.

It told him that Hiromichi had stolen Soul Reader, and that in order to steal something, he had to be close enough — about the distance he had been at when he had swung his arm before.

"Yu! What happened?" Mutsuko asked from behind him, seeming to notice that Yuichi was acting strangely.

"Looks like he took Soul Reader," Yuichi said. "I can't see labels anymore."

"Oh!" For some reason, there was joy mixed in with her surprise. "That's right! There's always someone who can steal powers! So if we want to steal it back, we've gotta figure out how he stole it! The conditions for stealing it seemed a little too simple, so maybe stealing it back will be simple, too? Anyway, you should probably beat him up and knock him out! If that's all it takes to get it back, then you're good! Then if that doesn't work, we'll tie him up and take him back with us, negotiate, and torture him! Then if he still won't give it back of his own free will, we'll think of something else!"

Mutsuko's thoughts seemed to be trending in a "beat him up no matter what" direction.

Yuichi looked at Hiromichi. It would be easy enough to beat him up; his stance suggested he was a novice at fighting.

Yuichi had ways of bridging the gap to Hiromichi in an instant, and he had long-range attacks, too. He didn't know what kind of abilities the other boy had, but he could probably dominate him in the instant before he could use any of them.

Well, all my sister ever says is to beat people and break stuff anyway...

As Yuichi was about to do what he'd been told, he realized something.

Did he even need to take back Soul Reader? As he thought about that, he flicked the coin he'd been hiding for a while with his finger.

Hiromichi couldn't react in time. If it had hit his throat, it could have killed him, and if it had hit his eye, it could have significantly crippled his ability to fight. But Yuichi had only grazed it across his cheek.

"Eek!" Hiromichi let out a shriek of fear, apparently not sure what Yuichi had done.

"Hey! Yu! Why'd you miss intentionally?!" Mutsuko seemed angry about his unexpected action.

"I know that you can do something weird when you get close to someone," Yuichi said. "But I don't need to get close to attack you. So, what now?"

Hiromichi cackled. "You think you've won, do you? Fine, then! I'll leave for now! But I won't forget this! And I'm gonna get even

stronger!”

Leaving behind a number of what mainly sounded like ass-covering excuses, Hiromichi retreated. It seemed he had no way to fight back against long-range attacks.

Knowing what he did about Hiromichi’s personality, Yuichi had judged him to be the type who would back off at the slightest threat. It seemed that was true. With his opponent completely demoralized, this was now a good chance to attack; instead, though, Yuichi just watched silently as Hiromichi ran away.

“Yu! What’s going on? This isn’t like you! Normally you’d run after a fleeing enemy, drag them to the ground, straddle them, and start beating them senseless while cackling the whole time!” Mutsuko exclaimed.

“The hell I would!”

“Wait! Did he hit you with a psychological attack?” Mutsuko asked with a theatrical gasp.

Yuichi smiled awkwardly. “Why would you assume that? Look, I can’t exactly fight with all these people around, can I?”

The people in the lobby were starting to look their way, likely noticing that something was off.

“True, but...”

“Besides, we need to take Takeuchi and Takizawa to the hospital first. And we can’t let Konishi stay a cat forever. If he’s gonna run, for now, let’s let him do it.” That wasn’t how he really felt, but it would do well enough to get her off his back for the time being.

“True... I guess that’s that, then. We’ll take Soul Reader back later.” Mutsuko sounded very reluctant about it, but she did give her assent.

The relevant players — Yuichi Sakaki, Mutsuko Sakaki, Yuri Konishi, and Monika Sakurazaki — had gathered in Nihao the China.

Yuri, having formerly taken the form of a cat, was now a blonde girl dressed in expensive-looking clothing. An old man who'd looked like a butler had brought the clothing to the hospital so that she could change there.

Monika was a young girl with her hair tied back with a scrunchy. Though she wore an elementary school uniform, she was actually 16 years old, the same age as Yuichi. She apparently had stopped aging after she'd become an Outer.

He'd strong-armed Natsuki and Aki Takizawa into checking in at the hospital, so they weren't here right now.

A waitress in a cheongsam, Tomomi Hamasaki, though not exactly a relevant player, stood a little ways away, watching them.

On Sunday morning, a girl named Furu Shinomiya from the local shrine had asked him to go searching for an evil presence. He'd made it underground, fought the avatar of the Evil God, run into Hiromichi after he surfaced, and then taken the girls to the hospital. It had been just after noon when they'd gotten back. That was the busiest time for most restaurants, but as usual, there were no customers here.

“Why'd you call me here so suddenly? And who's this person? I don't want to get anyone involved who doesn't need to be!” Monika was pointing peevishly at Yuri Konishi.

“It is true that I do not need to be involved, but now that I *am*, you are hardly in a position to throw me out,” Yuri shot back.

It was true that Yuri was a mere tag-along, uninvolved in the

Evil God's war. But having come this far, he had felt obligated to explain things to her to some degree.

"Well, she's an anthromorph, so she can probably keep up with the weirdness," Yuichi said.

"Okay, fine. So, what's the important thing you had to tell me?" Monika demanded.

"Oh, right. I lost Soul Reader, actually."

Soul Reader had originally belonged to Monika. It had been transferred to him as part of repaying a debt.

"So what?" she asked. Then suddenly, her jaw dropped. "Wait, what?!" It seemed it had taken her a moment to realize what he was saying.

"It's true that I can't sense Soul Reader in Yuichi right now," said a thing that looked like a daifuku mochi with eyes and a mouth that had appeared on Monika's shoulder.

It was an imaginary creature that managed the debt that Monika owed Yuichi, and was the one who had actually transferred Soul Reader to him.

Monika's life had been threatened, and she had used an ability called "Save Me, My Prince" to try to save herself. It was an ability that warped the laws of causality to make sure that someone saved her, and in exchange, it came with a heavy price.

When Yuichi had appeared to save her, Monika had tried to welch on the deal, which had turned out to be a huge mistake; the daifuku mochi creature had appeared and without her permission had transferred her ability, Soul Reader, to Yuichi as payment.

"Huh? Huh? Huh? So what happens now?" Monika seemed completely panicked.

“The ability belonged to Yuichi, so it was his to throw away, destroy, or give to someone else... but could I ask exactly what happened?” the daifuku mochi asked.

“Yeah, looks like it was stolen.”

“Looks like it was stolen”? Give me a break! At least *sound* like you care!” Monika shouted.

Yuichi was aware he perhaps wasn’t giving it the gravity it deserved. But what else could he do? It was a mostly useless ability that had caused him more harm than good. Now it was gone, and he couldn’t be happier.

“Go get it back! It was mine to begin with! I was just loaning it to you!” Monika yelled.

“She’s right! You’re taking this *way* too lightly, Yu!” Mutsuko seemed to agree.

“Look, Soul Reader wasn’t even the thing I actually wanted to talk about,” Yuichi said. “I just thought I should probably let you know... but, fine. Assuming it’s even possible, I’ll try to get it back.” He realized the conversation wasn’t going to progress unless he said that. He really had no intention of playing host to Soul Reader again, but if he could find a way to give it back to Monika directly, he’d do it.

“Okay,” Monika said after a pause. “So what’s the real issue? Something more important than Soul Reader?”

“Um, I was thinking. Could we drop out of the Divine Vessels War?”

Everyone except for Yuichi froze up, shocked.

“What?! You mean that because you lost Soul Reader, you don’t need the wish anymore? What the heck?! You said you’d

save my friend! You said that a human life was more important! Were you really just planning to use the wish to get rid of Soul Reader?”

“I’m not going to abandon your friend,” Yuichi said.

If you collected the Divine Vessels, you could get a wish granted — but only one. Yuichi knew that, and he certainly had said Monika could have his wish.

But Monika’s wish was to save her friend from psychopaths who were coming after her, and it seemed to him like there must be a way to save her without resorting to something as overblown as the Divine Vessels War.

Of course, it was true that he had come up with the idea because Soul Reader was gone, and he might not have thought of it otherwise.

“I was told that if the Evil God revives, humanity goes extinct,” Yuichi said. “Did you know that?”

“No way! No one mentioned that!”

“Well, I don’t know if that’s really true,” Yuichi said. “A guy calling himself the Evil God’s avatar said it. He did say he’d grant a wish, but that he’d move to kill off humanity the moment the Evil God was resurrected. So if that happens, what good would it do to save your friend?”

Yuichi’s instincts told him that the Evil God hadn’t been lying.

“But... what’s the point, then? No one’s wish could possibly matter, then!” Monika cried.

“That’s true. But the question is whether the participants in the war know that.”

The Evil God wanted them to fight, but if they knew what he

had planned, they might lose the will to do so. That made it in his best interest not to tell them.

“Well, I don’t know the participants’ motivations,” Yuichi said. “But I do know that I don’t want to stay mixed up in this non-sense forever.”

“But then what about Wakana?!” Monika cried.

Wakana was Monika’s best friend, a denizen of Monika’s original worldview, now in her first year of high school.

Monika’s worldview had been “A Hopelessly Romantic Little World.” It had apparently been a worldview where shojo manga-like love stories played out, but because Monika had been expelled from her world as an Outer, her friend had ended up on an entirely different track. The ones pining for Wakana were now twelve psychopaths.

“You said things would get dicey once she got into high school,” Yuichi said. “How’s it looking?”

“It’s a stalemate right now, with a trepidatious balance. The twelve are sizing each other up rather than approaching Wakana directly. I don’t think she even realizes what’s going on yet.”

“Okay. I’ll take care of them, then. Once I give them a smack-down, things should probably work out.”

“As usual, you’re a violence-obsessed brute. It’s not as if you can kill them, so won’t they just come back for revenge?” Yuri had been listening quietly, but she apparently couldn’t stay silent through that.

“Good point. Sis, you think you can do something about that?” Yuichi looked to Mutsuko for backup, but she turned up her nose and ignored him. It was strange; this was usually the part where she’d start jabbering endless nonsense about what she could do to

interfere.

“Well, perhaps I could be of assistance,” Yuri said. “I have no issue with burying a dozen high schoolers in darkness. And as your girlfriend, I’m happy to help.”

“What are you, the mafia? I don’t want a girlfriend who can do that kind of thing, and you’re not even my girlfriend anyway. Don’t think you can slip that stuff in when I’m not paying attention.”

“Well, I don’t actually have that level of influence just yet, anyway,” Yuri admitted. “You’ll need to secure my position as heir first.”

“You sure are trying to slip a lot in...” he muttered.

Yuri was part of a group of people competing to become the heir of the Sumeragi family, which were apparently the shadow rulers of Japan. She seemed to think that Yuichi would help her with that competition.

“The point is, we don’t need to take part in the Divine Vessels War to save your friend, so there’s no benefit to us in continuing with it,” he said. “We’d be more likely to save her if we go and interfere directly, anyway. Right?”

“Well... that... may be true, certainly...” Monika sounded a bit disoriented about the thought of just dropping out of the war, but she was also starting to come around to the idea.

“What are you talking about, Yu? Are you crazy? Once you’re in battle royal... I mean, battle *royale*, you can’t just drop out of it!” Mutsuko, by contrast, was not coming around. She stood up, slamming a fist on the table.

“Why did you correct yourself?” Yuichi asked, rhetorically. All she had done was change the pronunciation to sound more

French, but that didn't change the meaning.

“What kind of protagonist drops out of a game once it's started? It's bizarre!” she exclaimed. “This is a superpower blood-bath! It's a melting pot of battle, betrayals, alliances, greed, and karmic retribution! Suddenly, a third faction appears! The whole universe is at stake, the life of all sentient beings on the line! And now what, you want to just quit?! You've ruined the storyline! The high concept is out the window! What's *wrong* with you? This is like a weekly shonen manga that abruptly ends after ten weeks with ‘And so their battle continues!’”

“I'm telling you, I don't want to do it!” Yuichi snapped. “Listen, the only reason I've gone along with fighting all these weirdos is because I had Soul Reader! I could see the Serial Killers and the Gods and stuff, so I felt like I had to do something about them! But now that's all in the past! I just want to be an ordinary person who doesn't have to deal with any of this ever again!”

It was the truth. Now that he was free of Soul Reader, he couldn't understand why he had bothered getting involved with all the nonsense in the first place. It was like looking back on a fever dream.



“Are you *kidding* me?! Aren’t you the one who looked at an Outer and said that cool ‘I’m gonna kill every one of you’ line?!”

“That was just... the heat of the moment...” Yuichi averted his eyes.

It was true that he wanted them to pay for what they’d done. He wanted to kill them all. But realistically speaking, Yuichi was just an ordinary high school student. He couldn’t just go around hunting down and killing Outers. All he could do was wait for them to do something, and then react.

“That’s so uncool, Yu!” Mutsuko shouted. “It’s the uncoolest thing I’ve ever heard! So, what, are you just gonna hand in your protagonist credentials? Snap out of it, Yu! Collect all the Divine Vessels and face off against the Evil God!”

“Protagonist, huh? Well, if being a protagonist means I’ve gotta say ‘yare, yare’ and keep on with this stupid nonsense game, then I’d rather be a side character!” Yuichi rose to his feet, glaring at Mutsuko.

“Fine,” Mutsuko snapped back. “Let’s set aside the Divine Vessels thing for now. But you went out on that search because you knew there was an evil presence in this town, right? What are you gonna do about that? Are you just gonna leave an evil god who says he’s gonna destroy the world at large?”

“I’m gonna leave it to the specialists! We pretty much know the Evil God’s deal now: what he looks like, what he wants, and where his shrine is. If I just tell Shinomiya about it, her people will know how to handle it!”

The young man who claimed to be the avatar of Nergal had said that if he went too far, “allies of good” would come to stop him. That meant that there were forces who opposed the Evil God. Plus, even though he had run several Divine Vessels Wars in

the past, the world hadn't been destroyed, which meant that those opposing forces must have known what they were doing.

Furu Shinomiya was the daughter of a shrine priest. She was also a monster hunter, and she said she'd petitioned their main association for help, so they could probably handle it somehow.

"Fine... forget you! Do whatever you want!" Mutsuko turned away sulkily, then stormed angrily out of the shop.

"Dammit!" Yuichi threw himself down in his seat.

"H-Hey... aren't you gonna go after her?" Monika asked in concern. "I don't know exactly what you were arguing over, but I don't want to be the cause of a sibling quarrel..."

"It's okay," Yuichi said. "This wasn't any of her business anyway. I'll help you out with your friend, don't worry. Just give your Divine Vessel to me for now. You're okay with dropping out, right?"

"What will you do with it?" Monika asked.

"I haven't thought about it yet, but we need to get rid of them."

Monika still seemed a bit tortured about it, but at last, reluctantly, she handed the glass ball over to Yuichi.

The Evil God's eye. Yuichi already had one, which meant that he had two now. Divine Vessels resonated to communicate their location to each other, which meant he'd have to get rid of them to drop out of the war, but at the moment, Yuichi's mind was on something else.

It was on how mad his sister had gotten.

Is she really mad?

Well, knowing her, she'll probably forget soon enough, right?

he mused.

Will she? another thought retorted. *Have you ever seen her that mad before? Maybe I should run after her and apologize...*

But why do I have to do what she tells me to all the time, anyway?

That's right. I'm in high school now. Why do I have to do everything my big sister tells me?!

Yuichi tried to build up his courage, but it was no use. He'd never gone against his sister before.

Unbidden, the memories of all the things she'd done in the past were starting to rise up inside him.

Yuichi felt a chill run up his spine.

"Excuse me... are you all right?" Yuri of all people asked, snapping him out of his thoughts.

"Huh?" As he came back to himself, Yuichi realized he was cradling his head in his arms.

"Loathe as I am to simply mimic your sister, I agree that you were acting very uncool just now," she said. "Why must I be saddled with such a hopeless boyfriend?"

"Shut up," he said. "Besides, I'm not your boyfriend..."

But there was no force behind Yuichi's words.

* * * * *

A little time had passed since the group's discussion.

Aiko Noro was sitting in a cafe. It was the same cafe that had been hit by a truck earlier, but they seemed to be using it for a lot lately. Currently, Aiko was at the table next to the window. Across from her sat a middle school aged girl who appeared rather mature for her years, Yoriko Sakaki.

Yoriko was the one who called Aiko here.

“So, Yoriko, what is this about?” Aiko began. “You asked on the phone if I was with Sakaki...”

“That’s right,” Yoriko said. “My brother has gone missing, so I’m looking for him.”

“How long has he been missing?” Aiko asked, worried that something serious had happened. The last time she’d met Yuichi had been yesterday — Saturday, around noon. Had he not been home since then?

“Since this morning.”

“This morning?” Aiko repeated. “You don’t think he just went off somewhere... or does he always tell you before he goes anywhere?”

“Of course he doesn’t.” Yoriko sounded exasperated, but if that was the case, Aiko couldn’t see why she didn’t just assume he was running an errand or something.

“Um... in that case, why are you so anxious to know where he is today?”

“Because today is different! I assumed he’d gone out for morning training, but he stopped by the house, then went out somewhere else! He’s never done that before! I was hoping he’d go shopping with me today!”

Aiko couldn’t see what the problem was at all, so she just interpreted it as Yoriko really wanting to go shopping and feeling

neglected. It didn't sound like he'd promised her anything, so it was a bit odd that she was so upset about it. Still, Aiko could also sympathize a bit.

"Um, so today's Sunday. How does Sakaki usually spend his Sundays?"

"What's that? Are you trying to pry into my brother's private life?" Yoriko glared at her.

"That's not what I meant," Aiko said. "I just thought it might offer a hint as to where he's gone... and why did you call me, anyway?"

"Well... I thought that you might be hiding him, and that if I met you in person, I could get you to pony him up..." Yoriko said, hesitantly. It was hard to tell if that was how she really felt or not.

"Um, I really don't know where he is, though," Aiko said.

"Yes, that much is clear. I know you're not capable of lying, Noro."

Aiko didn't feel like that was meant as a compliment at all.

"Now, you asked about how my brother spends his Sundays. As I said before, he has training in the morning. In the afternoon he reads, or plays games, or goes to meet with friends."

"That sounds pretty normal... I thought he might do something more impressive."

"Like what? You thought he went off to fight evil organizations?"

"A little, yeah."

"It's been this way since he entered high school. Back in middle school, he went around purging all the various factions

around here — though I wouldn't exactly call them evil organizations — on our big sister's orders."

"Wow, so he really did do that..." Aiko murmured.

"That's why there hadn't been many yakuza in the area until that recent incident," said Yoriko. "Groups like the one that tried to cause trouble for me are effectively trying to fill the vacuum he created."

"I was curious, but I guess that doesn't give us any clues as to where he is," Aiko said.

"If that was all it took to figure it out, I wouldn't need to ask you."

Aiko bristled a bit at her condescension, but decided to attack the conversation from another angle. "Hmm, Sakaki's helping Monika out now, so maybe it's something to do with that? Which means he could be with Monika, or with Dannoura..."

Yuichi had recently gotten involved with the Divine Vessels War. Monika was the central figure of that, and Chiharu Dannoura had a Divine Vessel.

"I see," Yoriko mused. "He's still doing that... very well. Then, Noro, please come shopping with me."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because that's what I wanted to do?"

"Well, okay," Aiko said. "I don't have anything else to do, anyway... Hey, isn't that Sakaki there?"

While wondering why she had to go shopping with Yoriko, Aiko had glanced out the window, only to notice Yuichi was passing in front of the cafe.

“That woman! The one from the beach!” Yoriko said in a barely-repressed scream.

Walking next to Yuichi was Yuri Konishi, the girl they had met her during their summer trip to the ocean. She had been their enemy at that time, so Yoriko likely didn’t think very highly of her.

“What’s going on here, Noro?!” Yoriko yelled.

“Um, how should I know? But Konishi did ask Sakaki out, and she wanted him to learn more about her...”

“What? What do you mean, she asked him out? No one mentioned this to me!”

“Well, Sakaki beat that anthromorph god thing, which meant all the anthromorph women fell for him, and then Konishi asked him out—”

“And what did he say?!” Yoriko shouted, forgetting herself. She was the kind of girl who stood out to begin with, and her behavior would only attract more attention.

“Yoriko, you should probably keep your voice down.”

“I’m sorry,” Yoriko said, a trifle quieter. “So, what did he say?”

“Sakaki turned her down, but Konishi basically said she hadn’t given up yet.”

“I see. This might be quite bad. Look at how close they’re walking! That’s within the boundaries of personal space. And what’s with my brother?! How can he let an enemy get that close?”

“Well, I don’t think she’s an enemy... wait, actually, is she?” Aiko couldn’t say for sure, given recent events, whether or not she really would count as an enemy.

Yuri was walking next to Yuichi. Aiko also thought they were a bit too close, and she felt a bit sour about it.

“I didn’t know my brother was so vulnerable to a hard sell... if this keeps up, they’ll slide right into dating,” Yoriko muttered.

“Y-You think?” Aiko didn’t want to believe that was the case, but she felt a little nervous, not knowing how Yuichi would respond to a come-on from a girl.

“Noro, would you work with me?” Yoriko asked. “She’s dangerous! We can’t just ignore this!”

“Work with you? How?”

“If he’s vulnerable to a hard sell, then you need to throw yourself at him, too! Our first task is to halt her monopoly!”

“Um, you’re sure you’re all right with me doing that?”

“Yes,” Yoriko said. “Tying you to my brother to avert a worst case scenario was within the scope of my plans from the start.”

“It’s a little scary to hear that you have plans, but that aside, what should we do? Go after him?”

“No. As I said before, I won’t get in the way of someone going after my brother. Putting in reactionary effort is a waste. So first we need to think of a way to get him together with you.”

“Um, are you really sure it’s okay?”

“You don’t like the idea?”

“It’s not that I don’t like it...”

“Don’t worry,” Yoriko assured her. “Someone as innocent and gullible as you can be easily dealt with later.”

“R-Really?” Aiko was indeed as innocent as Yoriko suggested, and therefore could not imagine what she was secretly planning.

At any rate, she decided to work with her.

* * * * *

Yuichi and Yuri walked among the throng.

After the meeting at Nihao the China had dispersed, Yuichi had headed for the shopping district, and Yuri had come along with him.

“I see you’ve gotten over your earlier depression,” she said. “You look so satisfied with yourself, it’s a bit repulsive.”

“You really don’t want me to like you, do you?” But Yuichi was so happy, he didn’t even mind the insult. He was, in fact, smiling a little.

As he walked, he scanned the people around him to be sure. There were no annoying labels above their heads. It was such a refreshing feeling.

He felt as though his mind was clear again for the first time in a long time. He hadn’t realized how much of a burden Soul Reader had been until it was gone.

He was still a little worried about having made Mutsuko mad, but that was starting to feel more and more like a trivial matter. His feeling of liberation was more than enough to let him dismiss his sister’s bad mood. He had no intention of taking back Soul Reader as Mutsuko wanted, anyway; he never wanted to use it again.

“So, did you come here to confirm that you can’t see any la-

bels?” Yuri asked.

“Mainly. But there’s one other thing.” Yuichi pointed to his destination, a shop for “wagashi,” Japanese sweets.

He bought some mitarashi dango, rice flour dumplings covered in sweet sauce. It was Mutsuko’s favorite food, and a cheap way to buy his way back into her favor.

“Big Sis is really predictable,” he said. “If I feed her, she’ll forget all about it.”

“You think *this* will suffice to make her forget about it?” Yuri asked. “She seemed a bit too angry for that, to me.”

“I-It’ll be fine! She can really erupt when she gets mad, but she also calms down really quickly.” That was how it had always been. She immediately lost her temper when things didn’t go her way, but if you offered a little compromise, she’d quickly come around.

Of course, this isn’t much of a compromise...

Mutsuko’s request had been for him to recover Soul Reader, and this wasn’t doing anything to solve that. Still, it was the best he could think of.

“Well, I’d better head home,” Yuichi said. “I’m pretty tired.”

His day had started that morning at the shrine, and he’d been through a lot since then. He was genuinely ready to take a break.

Yuichi waved to Yuri as they left the wagashi shop and started walking towards home. But he soon found Yuri still walking beside him as if it was a matter of course.

“I see,” she said. “Will this be one of those at-home dates I hear penniless commoners so often engage in?”

“What makes you think you’re invited back with me?”

“It’s true that if I were to pay, it might insult your masculine sense of honor, so I don’t mind at all!” Yuri declared. “Do you have a game system at your home, Yuichi Sakaki? I’m rather good at games, you see. I can win at any fighting game!”

“Listen to me!” he snapped. “I said I’m tired, so I’m going home and going to bed. I’m not hanging around with you!”

“Bed? My, you do move quickly, Yuichi Sakaki! But such plans are also in my favor. It’s not my mating season, but that doesn’t mean we can’t do it!”

Yuichi hated dealing with one-track minds like this. While he was stewing over how to respond, he realized that the area around them was completely deserted.

It was Sunday afternoon in the shopping district, which certainly meant that business could lag from time to time. But it still seemed a little unnatural. Yuichi slowed to a stop and looked all around him.

There was nothing.

Then, there was the sound of wings.

It was coming from the sky above.

“That guy...”

“Yes, the one we saw this morning.”

A boy dressed like a mountain monk with black wings on his back — in other words, a tengu — dropped down from the sky to land in front of Yuichi and Yuri.

“Hey. It’s been a while.” The boy, who looked about Monika’s age, smiled casually yet confidently at him.

Yuri seemed unimpressed. “Oh? Wasn’t your tier placement

already decided? You lost to the man who looked like a priest, and then Yuichi Sakaki beat the priest. That puts you at the bottom of the hierarchy.”

“Shut up! I let my guard down back then, that’s all.”

“So, what do you want?” Yuichi demanded. He assumed the guy was here about the Divine Vessels War, but the priest had probably already taken his Divine Vessel, which meant he should already be out of the game.

“Huh? You can’t feel the resonance?”

“Hmm? Is there a resonance right now?”

“You’re not a host?”

The Divine Vessels resonated, communicating their location to one another. But as Yuichi wasn’t host to a vessel, he wasn’t aware of when it was going on.

Yuichi had both of Monika’s Divine Vessels — the Evil God’s right and left eyes — in his possession, but they both already had hosts, so he couldn’t use them himself.

Even if he could, he probably wouldn’t, since he was trying to drop out of the fight.

“Nah,” Yuichi said. “But didn’t the priest take your Divine Vessel?”

“Yeah, but when I woke up, he was knocked out, so I took it back from him. Never mind about that, though. I went there to beat you, which means I can’t just leave things unsettled, and I bet you can’t either!”

“No, I absolutely can.”

“Indeed,” Yuri said. “You are clearly the weakest of the three.”

“We won’t know that until we fight!” the tengu shouted. “Sometimes it’s like rock-paper-scissors. I lost to him, but that might have just been a bad match-up! I haven’t actually lost to you!”

“Fine. Let’s get this over with. Just don’t give me any more ‘I let my guard down’ crap later.” Yuichi could have attacked at any point while they were talking, but he’d specifically decided to wait for the conversation to be over. It was an annoying situation, but walking away might offend him, and if he took him by surprise, he might come back again to complain later. He clearly just wanted to have a fair fight.

“I won’t let my guard down again, so no problem!” As the tengu boasted, his body seemed to slide to the side. There had been not the slightest movement in his limbs; it was just his wings that were moving.

That’s creepy!

An enhancement of aerial mobility seemed to be the ability granted by his Divine Vessel.

Yuichi didn’t know what the tengu was trying to do, exactly, but he was rushing all around in an ostentatious display of his mobility. He’d move to the right, then pivot, streak upwards without warning, then plummet back down. The way the creature moved seemed to defy both gravity and momentum.

“Well? Can you keep up with me?”

Yuichi watched the tengu dispassionately. His body offered no signs that allowed Yuichi to predict what he’d do next. His wings seemed to be what propelled him, but it was hard to tell from the movement of those wings exactly what his next move was going to be. He could learn, perhaps, but he’d need a little time. It might be trouble if the tengu made use of some projectile weapon on top of his mobility, but it seemed there was no need to worry

about that.

As the tengu moved around wildly, he slowly closed the gap between them. He flew around Yuichi, drawing closer, then abruptly vanished from his sight. Yuichi lashed out behind him with a kick.

The counter hit the charging tengu in the solar plexus. Then, as his foot was sinking in, Yuichi pivoted on his standing leg to face the tengu again, then slammed him down onto the ground with his foot.

The tengu, charging in at such a high speed, couldn't react at all, and was helplessly pinned to the ground by Yuichi.

"Ngh!" The tengu let out a pained cry.

"Your movements were so basic, they didn't serve as any kind of distraction," Yuichi said coolly. He hadn't been able to anticipate the tengu's actions through his body movements, but the pattern had been obvious enough. It was easy for an attacker to fall into simple patterns while moving rapidly, and the tengu hadn't seemed to be thinking about that at all.

"I would expect a flier to stay up in the air and drop things down on you," Yuri commented. "The easiest thing to prepare would have been boiling water."

"Well, that's true," Yuichi said. "But you have some pretty vicious thoughts..."

"Sh-Shut up!" the tengu shouted. "This is why I hate women! A competition between men can't be like that."

"Well, you have good timing, anyway. Here, these are for you." Still keeping his foot firmly planted, Yuichi retrieved the two eyes from his breast pocket, and set them down next to the tengu. "I don't need them anymore, and I wasn't sure what to do with

them. I thought about pissing everyone off by throwing them into a volcano somewhere, but that would also be more effort than I want to expend...”

The tengu looked taken aback. “W-Wait a minute... then there was no need for us to fight...”

“You’re the one who challenged me. Now, I’m not gonna indulge this crap any more, so leave me alone.” Yuichi lifted his foot off the tengu.

“Merciless, even against a child,” Yuri commented. “But I’m also impressed that you could deal so calmly with a flying monster like that. Truly astonishing.”

“He surprised me at first, but I’ve gotten used to supernatural surprises like his by now,” Yuichi shrugged. “Anyway, now I’m totally disconnected from the Divine Vessels War!”

Still feeling like he was forgetting something, Yuichi headed triumphantly for home.

Yuri tried to follow him, but he eventually managed to drive her off. When he arrived home, though, Mutsuko hadn’t been back yet.

She didn’t come home for the rest of the day, either.

Chapter 2: Yuichi's Peaceful School Life?

It was the Monday morning after that extremely eventful Sunday.

Mutsuko hadn't been at the breakfast table.

That in itself was not unusual — Mutsuko often went missing for long stretches of time — so while Yuichi was worried that his getting her angry yesterday was the cause, he also went to school convinced that she'd be back soon enough.

“White Collar Worker” no longer hung over the head of the man next door, and there were no “Middle School Student” or “High School Student” labels in sight. A completely ordinary walk to school unfurled before Yuichi's eyes.

The next thing he knew, Aiko was walking beside him. “Hey, you seem pretty happy. What happened?”

Yuichi squinted at her, but there was definitely no label over her head. “Huh? Oh, I guess I am. I must be pretty over the moon... I didn't even notice you come up.” She'd always been someone he could let his guard down around, anyway; if someone malicious had approached him, he surely would have noticed them, no matter how pleased with himself he was. “The truth is, Soul Reader's gone!”

Yuichi explained to Aiko everything that had happened yesterday.

“I see,” she said. “That's pretty great, though I feel a little sad about it. I mean, Soul Reader was the reason you saved me, after all.”

Yuichi may have only gotten mixed up in all these strange incidents because of Soul Reader, and the start of it all had been Hiromichi Rokuhara's attack on Aiko. It was true that it had been useful in a few situations, but Yuichi wasn't about to say he wanted it back because of just that.

"Anyway, it's fine if you don't want to take part in the war, but what will we do about Monika?" she went on.

"That's a good question," Yuichi said. "I'm still looking into that. It's taking place at another school, after all. It would usually be Sis's field, but..."

Apparently, twelve psychopaths were fighting over Monika's friend. Right now they were keeping each other in check, so she wasn't in any immediate danger, but there was no telling how long that peace would last.

"Did something happen between you and your sister?" Aiko asked.

"I said I wasn't going to get Soul Reader back, and she got pretty mad and ran off somewhere. She hasn't been home since yesterday."

"Huh? Are you sure she's okay? Um, I don't know what you're thinking, but a girl in high school can't just spend a night out without permission..." Aiko asked seriously, as if genuinely worried about something.

"She's been gone days without coming home before, so I'm not worried about that part. Besides, I don't think talking to her right now would do either of us any good anyway."

"Monika's friend attends Nagizawa Academy, right?" Aiko asked. "I have a friend who goes there. Should I talk to her?"

"That's a good idea. It would be helpful to get some perspec-

tive on the situation. Hey, are you walking closer to me than usual?”

Aiko had nearly been pressed up against Yuichi’s side for a while now.

“A-Am I? I think this is how we usually do it...” Aiko said with feigned obliviousness.

Yuichi decided it wasn’t worth worrying about.

Yuichi arrived in the classroom, and once again, there were no labels in sight.

No witches or zombies here, just a perfectly ordinary high school classroom.

I wonder if it’ll be like I never had any interaction with them at all, or whether the fact that I saw them once will mean I’m connected to them for good...

The ex-“Witch,” An Katagiri, was glaring at Yuichi as always.

Well, whether she’s a witch or not, she’s always been that way. Yuichi forced himself not to worry.

They’d already had a bit of an interaction, so that wasn’t going to go away. At the very least, this would mean fewer chances to get drawn into bizarre incidents.

As Yuichi sat down, the boy in front of him, Shota Saeki, spoke up. “You’re looking pleased with yourself.”

Naturally, the “Ace Striker” label no longer hung above his head. But surely, just because he didn’t have the label didn’t change that he was still on the soccer team.

“Guess I am,” Yuichi said. “You could say I found a cure for my headaches. I’d been really worried about it, so it’s pretty great.”

“Wow, the migraines?” Shota asked. “Can you cure those? They really bother my mom on rainy days...”

“I’m not sure. It might be a case-by-case thing. There are specialist outpatient facilities for that stuff, so maybe she could visit one of those about it?”

Yuichi worked up a fairly innocuous cover story, and just then, the teacher arrived.

“Hello, everyone! Your beloved teacher, Hanako Nodayama, is back!”

The class burst into whispers.

Early in the second term, Hanako had taken time off for poor health. Yuichi had heard that she would be coming back sooner or later, but most people had assumed she would wait until the start of third term to make the transition smoother.

As usual, she didn’t look like she belonged in the suit she was wearing, but her hair was now black and short. A change in her state of mind, perhaps.

I wonder if Shikitani did something for her...

Hanako’s condition had seemed to be primarily psychological; the cause of it had been a betrayal by her fiancé, which had in turn been caused by the Outer Makina Shikitani. But afterwards, Makina had said that she would find a way to make things right.

“Hey, it’s a little cruel to ignore your teacher when she’s back after so long,” Hanako complained. “I mean, I know it’s bad timing and all...”

The students weren’t actually looking at Hanako; they were

looking at the boy in the high-collared uniform beside her.

“You may have already guessed this, but we have a transfer student today. Transfer students in high school are a thing you mainly see in dramas and manga, so this is quite the rarity! It feels like the sort of first-page-of-my-youth development you all love!”

The transfer student had blond hair and blue eyes, and there was something foreign about his features, which seemed to have piqued the girls’ interest a bit more than the boys’.

The transfer student had been casting glances at Yuichi for a while. Yuichi did recognize him, but he found himself getting more and more irritated.

“Hey-low. My nay-um is Kyow-shee-row Ee-buh-rah-kee. It is su-wuch a play-jore to meet yoo aw-ull!”

What was getting on Yuichi’s nerves was the stupid accent the guy was using.

Around lunchtime, Ibaraki came over to Yuichi’s seat. “Hey!”



“I wish you had died,” Yuichi responded without thinking.

“Hey, don’t start off with the punchline to an urban legend!”

“Let’s just say I was really hoping that losing Soul Reader might sever the connection between us.”

“What are you talking about? Isn’t Soul Reader the thing that lets you see labels? Wait, is it seriously gone?”

“I’ll explain later.”

“Huh? Sakaki, do you know the transfer student?” Shota asked while he was pushing their desks together.

“You could say that.” Yuichi brushed it off.

Even if he’d overheard the term “Soul Reader,” he probably wouldn’t understand it, but Yuichi also realized he probably shouldn’t talk about it publicly.

“Ibaraki, you’re really good at Japanese,” Shota added, impressed.

“Well, naturally. I was born in Japan and have lived here all my life. People just like it when I play the foreigner. It’s a little gag I do.”

“You think a little gag will make people accept an oni?” Yuichi muttered blackly. For some reason, everything Ibaraki did got on his nerves.

“I’m surprised, though. I wouldn’t have expected you to transfer here, Ibaraki,” Aiko said, bringing her lunch by as well.

Yuichi noticed with a hint of surprise that Aiko had brought two lunch boxes today. He didn’t remember her being much of a glutton.

“He couldn’t have transferred,” Yuichi said. “He said he just wears the uniform as a disguise and doesn’t actually go to school, right? Are you even on the national register?”

“Maybe we should save that talk for later?” Ibaraki asked.

“No, forget it. It’s not like I actually care.”

“Hey! I know that’s what you always say, but it still really stings!”

“By the way, what makes you think you can butt your way into eating with us?” Yuichi added. “Who gave you permission?”

“Sakaki, what’s the big deal?” Aiko said, mediating, and in the end, the four of them ended up eating together.

They all pulled out their lunch boxes, but Yuichi froze when he saw what lay inside of his.

“That’s a weird diet you’ve got,” Ibaraki said, peering over in disbelief.

“Wait... wait a minute. This is...”

There was a lead plate in his lunch box. It looked familiar to him; it was the same stuff he used to fine-tune his training weights.

“I’m pretty sure Yori was supposed to make my lunch today...” he murmured. Yuichi’s lunches were usually packed either by his mother or his little sister, Yoriko; today it had been Yoriko’s job. “Did I do something to make her mad? Do both of my sisters hate me now?”

It was a natural thing to think, given the situation. He tried lifting the lunch box; the weight had been calculated perfectly to avert suspicion. She must have done it this way to keep him from realizing he didn’t have a lunch.

Now that he knew what was in it, of course, he could tell that the center of balance was off, but that wasn't something he would have foreseen.

"I never would have believed there was just nothing inside it... this is way too elaborate for a nasty prank..." Yuichi wanted to clutch his head in his hands in confusion.

"Oh, um, Sakaki. I happened to bring two lunches today. Would you like one?" Aiko hesitantly offered.

"Noro, did you and Yori plan this?" Yuichi stared hard at Aiko. It was all too suspicious.

"O-Of course not. I just accidentally made too much for one, so I brought both along with me."

"Well, I don't have anything to eat, so thanks."

Aiko was clearly acting suspiciously, but Yuichi decided to eat her lunch anyway. He was pretty sure she wouldn't try to feed him anything weird, and even if she did have an ulterior motive, it was probably nothing sinister.

"Wow, I wish a girl would make lunch for me sometime," Shota said enviously, though Yuichi didn't find anything enviable about having a lunch forced on him under these bizarre circumstances.

"You're the ace of the soccer club," he responded. "Shouldn't the girls be all over you?"

"No, I get nothing. To the point where I'd kind of like to know why."

Even though he was the one who brought it up, Yuichi had no interest in why Shota was unpopular with women, and he turned his attention to Aiko's lunch. It was full of his favorite foods — which, he suspected, Yoriko must have told her about. Aiko really

was a great cook.

After lunch was over, Yuichi headed for the class next door, 1-A.

“Hey, you want to know why I’m here, right?” Ibaraki asked, following along.

Yuichi tried to ignore him, but he knew that if he left him alone, he’d probably just keep talking. “No, and please leave me alone. Excuse me, could you call Shinomiya here?” he said, addressing a student about to enter the room.

Soon after, a girl with long hair showed up.

This was Furu Shinomiya, the daughter of a shrine priest, and part of a monster hunter organization. They’d met during the incident with Noro’s vampire older brother, and they were currently working together to investigate an evil presence that had arrived in the city recently.

“What is it?” the girl asked. “Do we have to discuss it at school?”

“It’s about the thing we talked about. I figured sooner was better than later.” Yuichi could have gone to the shrine first thing in the morning, but now that they knew he was the one ruining their forests, he’d felt a little reluctant to stop by. He’d decided to talk to her at lunch that day instead.

“You learned something? Okay. Let’s go to the roof, then.”

“There might be a lot of people up there around lunchtime. Are you sure?”

“I can manage a spell to keep people away, at least. By the way, who’s that? You know he’s an oni, right? What’s he doing blend-

ing in with the students?” Furu glared at Ibaraki with obvious hostility.

“I’m not with him. He just follows me around,” Yuichi explained. “If you want to vanquish him, go ahead.”

“Not with you?” Ibaraki protested. “Well, I guess I’m not, but...”

Yuichi, completely uninterested in anything Ibaraki had to say, just turned and headed for the roof. Furu followed him, muttering something under her breath.

They climbed the stairs to the roof in time to find a crowd of students on the way down.

Furu’s spell must have worked, as there was no one up on the roof by the time they got there.

“Is this one of those barrier things?” Yuichi asked.

“Just a spell to drive people away. There’s not much power in it, just enough to make people think, ‘Ugh, I’m tired of being on the roof.’” Despite her words, Furu sounded a bit proud of it.

“I wish it had an effect that would send oni flying, too,” Yuichi said.

“Huh? Why do you hate me so much? It’s bizarre. What did I ever do to you?”

“It’s amazing,” Yuichi said. “You really think we can be friends after you tried to kill me the first time we met.”

“I’ve helped you a lot since then, though,” Ibaraki protested. “You need to learn to let the trivial stuff go.”

“Yeah, whatever. Anyway, I learned what that ‘great evil’ in the city is. There might be others, but this is the big one, I think.” Ig-

noring Ibaraki, Yuichi explained to Furu what had happened yesterday.

“I see,” she said. “Nergal, eh? The god of Babylonian myth, trying to revive himself... Thank you for your assistance. You’ve provided some very helpful information.”

“So if you tell that monster hunter organization about it, they can handle it?”

“Yes, it should be fine. We wouldn’t be able to handle it by ourselves, but they’ve solved a lot of situations at least this bad in the past.”

“Okay! Then I can leave it all to you guys?”

“Yes. Um, I thought you’d be the nosy sort, but you really don’t seem to be interested in this at all, do you? I was gonna give you a warning not to get involved with us again, but...” Furu seemed surprised, and almost a little bit disappointed.

“I’m just an ordinary guy in high school, so this is all a little over my head,” Yuichi said. “If there are specialists out there, I think we should leave this to them. I won’t train at your shrine anymore, and I don’t think I’ll get involved with you over any more of this dangerous stuff. That’s good for you, right?”

“You lost your sight, right? That’s probably for the best. Spirits mainly tend to go after people who can see them.”

“See you, then.” With that, Yuichi headed off the roof.

“Wait a minute!” Ibaraki shouted, running after him.

“What?” Yuichi groaned in reply.

“What are you gonna do? Just bow out?”

“That was the plan. They’ve got specialists to deal with what’s

going on; I don't need to be involved. Leave it to the pros, like they say."

"Oh, come on, you don't think it's a little late now? You're already involved in a ton of stuff."

"I probably can't ever fully get out, yeah. But I can get rid of as many connections as possible, right?"

"I get it. So that's why you're brushing me off?"

"No, I'm pretty sure this is how I've always treated you..."

"And why are you walking so fast?" Ibaraki demanded. "I'm an oni, you know. There's an oni in the school. Most people would want to know what that was foreshadowing!"

"I doubt it's anything that serious. Anyway, class is about to start, so I'm heading back. If I ever get bored enough to play word games with myself, maybe I'll ask for your story."

There were so many other dangerous things around, the addition of one oni didn't really change much. Yuichi decided to return to the classroom and attend his afternoon classes.

After class, Yuichi poked his face into the club room. He was with Aiko, who was a member of the club, and Ibaraki, who wasn't but had come along anyway. The only person in the club room was the vice president, Kanako Orihara.

"Um, did my big sister show up today?" Yuichi asked.

"No, she didn't. I think we'll have to cancel club for today... Has something happened to her?"

The club tended to be about whatever Mutsuko, as president, wanted to talk about, so they couldn't really do anything without her.

“She hasn’t been home since yesterday,” Yuichi explained. “Not that I’m all that worried. Knowing her, she’ll be fine...”

“Hey. I really think it’s a little weird for her not to come home at all...” Aiko said worriedly, furrowing her brow.

“Still, if she’s decided to go into hiding, there’s not much chance of finding her,” Yuichi said.

“Sakaki, can you be so sure she hasn’t been in an accident, or kidnapped by someone?” Aiko seemed to be getting tremendously upset about Yuichi’s laissez-faire attitude.

“Noro, the elder Sakaki called in this morning to let the school know that she’d be out sick,” said Kanako. “I don’t think it’s anything to be worried about.”

“Really?” Aiko sounded relieved. Yuichi was a little relieved to hear that, too. But if that was the case, it also meant that she was actively choosing not to come home or go to school.

Does that mean she really was that mad? Yuichi couldn’t be sure what Mutsuko’s motives were, but he couldn’t help but connect it to the incident from yesterday.

“Well, I guess we’ll be on our way home, then,” he said. “What will you do, Orihara?”

“I’m going to think a little bit about the subject of my next story, then head home. You can go on ahead without me.”

Now that she mentioned it, Yuichi noticed that Kanako had had a notebook open the entire time, and had been writing things in it occasionally. It was probably better not to interrupt her.

“I’m worried about Kureha, so I’d better get home,” Ibaraki said. “Sorry, I can’t walk back with you.”

“No problem. I didn’t want to walk back with you anyway.”

Yuichi mustered the most cheerful smile he could.

Ibaraki left with an awkward smile on his face.

Aiko sidled up to Yuichi as they left the school. “Sakaki, you’re really hard on Ibaraki.”

“No, seriously, do I really have a single reason to be his friend?” he demanded. “Maybe you forgot, but he’s a man-eating oni, remember? You never know what he might be getting up to.”

“But he’s helped us a lot.”

She was talking about how he had helped transport things for them, and how he’d looked after Monika for a while. He did feel a little bad about using him like that, but he couldn’t help that the way Ibaraki acted like his friend still grated on his nerves.

“It’s not like I wanted him to help us,” Yuichi said. “We just didn’t have any other options.”

“Well, okay. So, how did you like going through school without Soul Reader today?”

“You know, the whole world felt a little brighter. It was great. I feel like my school life has finally really gotten started.” Yuichi looked all around him.

The students walking home from school here and there had no labels over their heads. That was their natural state, of course, yet Yuichi was realizing for the first time what a wonderful thing that was.

The labels might not have seemed like much, but you couldn’t understand it unless you’d been through it how distracting they were. It was upsetting to have all that useless information floating right in your line of sight. He’d been picking up methods to divert

his attention away from the labels of late, but that wasn't perfect either, and the fact that he'd still seen them had been a constant source of stress.

"I mean, the truth is, I still remember what everyone's labels were, so I can't totally ignore that stuff. But I won't have to worry about it for people I meet in the future, and—"

Someone in the crowd spoke up, apparently overhearing them. "Oh, but you *should* worry. It's so more fun that way, you know?"

"Huh?" Yuichi said.

The comment had come from a girl who had been walking ahead of him. She had actually stopped and turned back in order to address him.

They were on the pedestrian walkway heading from school to the residential district, and it was wide enough that if he wanted to, he could just step aside and walk past her. But there was something about the way the girl looked straight at Yuichi that suggested he shouldn't ignore her. So Yuichi stopped, a short distance away.

She had red hair and wore a high school uniform that Yuichi recognized, though she looked a bit young to be in high school.

"Then I would have just been able to walk in front of you, and you'd be all, 'There's no label! She's an Outer!'" the girl explained. "It's ridiculous... but I guess Makina did something similar, so that would just be a rehash. Then again, I *do* love my clichés..."

"Who are you?" Yuichi stepped in front of Aiko protectively. The girl projected no hostility at the moment, but the way she spoke suggested she was connected with the Outers. That meant he could safely assume they were enemies.

"My name's Ende," the girl said. "As you've guessed, I'm an

Outer. Did Monika or Makina ever mention me?”

“Dunno,” he said. “So? What is it you want?”

“Right. I’ve known about you guys so long that I feel like we’re friends, but we’ve never actually met face to face. Since I’m taking part in the fight, too, I thought I’d come and say hello.”

“Sorry to tell you, but I don’t have any Divine Vessels.” Yuichi assumed “the fight” referred to the Divine Vessels War, but he’d already given his Divine Vessels away, so there shouldn’t be any reason for its participants to come after him ever again.

“Yeah, I’m aware that you were trying to drop out,” said Ende. “I just never thought you’d really go through with it. You made your big sister furious, you know.”

“You...”

“Sakaki,” Aiko whispered nervously, probably worried that Yuichi might lose his temper.

“I’m not happy about it either,” Ende said. “I made special plans especially to beat you, see?”

“Are you trying to pick a fight?” Yuichi demanded.

“Not me. I’m not the fighting type. Of course, if I just wanted to kill you, I could do it easily enough. But that would be totally boring, no fun at all!”



“I doubt it would be that simple.” Yuichi felt annoyed by the way she said it, not as a challenge, but as a simple statement of fact. “Well? You introduced yourself, so now get lost.”

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Ende said. “Hey, as long as we’re both here, why don’t we grab a cup of tea and get to know each other better?”

“I thought you were my enemy.”

“Enemy?” Ende said. “How could someone so harmless be your enemy? You know I have absolutely no combat ability, don’t you?”

“Yeah. I can tell you don’t do martial arts and you’re not physically strong. But Outers aren’t about that, are they?”

Monika had the ability to erase people’s memories, and Makina could create enclosed spaces where others would be forced to play games under the rules she set. All Outers had abilities based on the worldviews they came from.

“Oh, yeah, but I don’t have that stuff, either,” Ende assured him. “I can’t do a thing all by myself. I think you probably know that, too.”

“What do you mean?” he demanded.

“Just what I said. Even when you’re fighting a magic user or someone with superpowers, you can predict any attack they’re about to use, and pinpoint their weak points and stuff. I don’t know how it works exactly, but I bet that same instinct is telling you that I’m completely harmless.”

Ende was right about that. Yuichi could anticipate anything, even magic he’d never seen before. He could read intent from his opponents, and any attack, even magic and superpowers, was presaged by intent. Some sign of what they were about to do

would always show itself somewhere on their body in a way that told him that something was coming.

“In a real match, you never get a second chance” was a philosophy that his sister had drummed into his head. No matter who you were facing, even if you had no idea what they could do, you had to immediately ascertain their intent, and find a way to deal with it. It was the only way to win. If you couldn’t do that, you would die.

This unreasonable training of his sister’s had driven him to the brink of death many times, but the process had also raised his combat awareness to superhuman levels. That same awareness was telling him that Ende was completely harmless.

“Well, it’s not so much about getting to know each other as it is about giving you a bit of advice... a warning,” Ende said. “If you want to hang on to your peaceful high school life, you’d better hear me out.”

He didn’t know what she was after, but she didn’t seem to be lying.

“Nero! Are you here?” Yuichi called to nowhere in particular. Soon, a canine shape came around a corner and trotted toward them.

“What is it?” It was the werewolf Nero. He was one of the vampire Aiko’s retainers, and had sworn his loyalty to her. He could take human, wolfman, and wolf forms, and in the city, he disguised himself as a wolf-dog.

“Take Noro home,” Yuichi ordered. “I’m going to hear Ende out.”

“Huh?” Aiko stared in surprise, perhaps not expecting to hear him say that.

“She’s an Outer,” Yuichi said. “We don’t know what she might try, and I’m the only one she’s after.”

“Fine,” she said, after a pause. “Let’s go, Nero.”

After thinking it over a little, she must have realized that she’d just hold him back if things came to a fight, so she did as she was told and went off ahead.

“Now, shall we have some tea and a little chat?” Ende said. “Though I’m surely insufficient compared to the beautiful girls who usually surround you.”

She and Yuichi headed back toward the station.

“I’ve always wanted to come here once,” Ende told him. “It’s had a lot of mentions since I started following you.”

They were sitting in the cafe near the station, the same one that the runaway truck had crashed into during summer vacation. Yuichi had come here often since then.

“It’s really not all that special...” Yuichi said, feeling deflated.

It was starting to seem like she really didn’t have any combat abilities. He had intentionally given her a few obvious openings, and even made like he was going to attack her, yet she hadn’t reacted once. It wasn’t that he had let his guard down, but he was starting to feel foolish for keeping it up all the time.

“Anyway, we’re here now. What do you want to talk about?” he asked.

He was sitting in his usual seat by the window, with Ende sitting across from him. He had a feeling they’d never get to the main subject unless he forced it, so he tried to nudge her in that direction.

“You know, I’m surprised you came right along,” Ende said. “You must be very confident...”

“Can I go now?” Yuichi stood up, a little irritated by her belittling manner.

“Well, you know, it’s about the Divine Vessels War. Would you mind rejoining it?” Ende asked, as if it were a simple enough request.

“Absolutely not,” Yuichi answered immediately, having expected this to happen.

“Please, reconsider. As I said earlier, I’ve made special arrangements to beat you. If you won’t take part in the Divine Vessels War, I’ll have to resort to other measures.”

At a glance, it sounded like a threat, but Yuichi felt no malice or provocation in her words. It was a maddening feeling; he knew she was his enemy, but she jabbered on like they were old friends.

“I don’t know why you want to beat me so badly,” Yuichi shot back. “I’ve never even met you before. What do you have against me?”

He’d certainly earned his share of enmity in his time, so it was possible he’d done something to earn her resentment without realizing it. But he couldn’t remember ever meeting a girl named Ende before.

Her response was a dismissive laugh. “Come on, you heard from Makina about what Outers were, didn’t you? Generally we just like to kill time. At first, I was just trying to kill your big sister out of annoyance. But when that didn’t go well, I developed more interest in the both of you.”

“So you’re after my sister, huh?” Yuichi asked. “What’s your beef with her, exactly?”

“Soul Reader.”

“I told you, I don’t have it anymore... and besides, it belonged to Monika first. You shouldn’t have any reason to care about it.”

“Oh, but I do. You know that Soul Reader is a fundamental ability that all Outers possess, don’t you?”

“She did mention that, yeah...”

“The ability didn’t originally have a name. It was just something all Outers could do, so there was no need for one. But then your sister *gave* it a name!”

“Um, so?” he said. It was true that it was a ridiculous name, but Yuichi couldn’t see why Outers cared what his big sister called it.

“Call it a blind spot, I guess,” Ende said. “No one ever named it; no one ever invoked their right to name it. But then your sister *did*, and now it’s Soul Reader in perpetuity. It’s ridiculous!”

“Why can’t you just call it something else?”

“I can. I can call it whatever I want. But I’m still stuck with the feeling that no matter how I try to fight it, it’s just ‘Soul Reader’ by another name. The power to read things is *called* Soul Reader, and no matter how I try to change that, I can’t. It’s very annoying.”

“I don’t quite understand what you mean,” Yuichi said. “Is it a first-come-first-serve thing? So if I just give a random name to something, that’s what the name becomes?”

“Not you. Your sister can do it because she’s a Worldview Holder.” Ende smiled a knowing smile and watched Yuichi’s reaction curiously. “Hmm,” she said, after a moment. “You don’t seem very surprised. Wasn’t that a shocking revelation?”

“Eh... we’ve been through a lot,” he said. “I’d be more surprised by the revelation that she was a completely ordinary person. Telling me she has a worldview and that she can use it to influence things around her seems a lot more in tune with what I’ve observed.”

“Well, all right. The point is, I’m annoyed that she put a name on something without asking anyone. So I tried to kill you all, but I failed.”

“Are you the one who sent Makina after us?” he demanded. That was the only time an Outer had gone after them directly, so Yuichi wondered if Ende was behind that.

“No, it was earlier than that,” Ende said. “I’m the one who arranged things so that you’d go to Kurokami Island. I never thought you’d actually kill that anthromorph god... Anyway, that’s when I started to have interest in you, and seeing you in action made me want to start to meddle.”

“Then it’s all over, right? Now that I’ve lost Soul Reader, I’ll never do anything interesting again.”

“I see,” she said. “It sounds like I’ll have to find a way to motivate you.”

So that was that, in the end. She just didn’t want to have to cancel the plan or whatever that she’d set up to kill time, and that was why she’d gone out of her way to appear before Yuichi.

“Let’s see. If you refuse to participate, maybe I should just kill you right now,” Ende said, casually.

Yuichi could tell she wasn’t lying.

Chapter 3: One of Those “The True Battle Begins Now” Kind of Situations

Yuichi’s fist slammed into the giant’s face.

Rising diagonally out of a crouch, he planted his knuckles into the giant’s jaw and jostled his brainpan. It should have been enough to end the fight, but it also inspired a sinking feeling in Yuichi’s gut.

There was something strange about how the hit had connected. It didn’t feel like a human body. Rather, it didn’t feel like a *living* human body.

His fist had collided with the dead, mushy flesh of a corpse.

He was standing in a wide, circular space, a stone arena in the shape of a disc, facing off against the huge man while a huge audience looked on.

Even if they were underground, it was hard to believe you could run a facility this big without anybody finding out. But perhaps that was the secret society at work.

There was an underground martial arts tournament going on. Yuichi had advanced from the preliminaries and was now in the finals, and he’d just sent his opponent, a musclebound giant, flying.

Yuichi watched calmly as the giant slowly climbed to his feet.

Something was wrong. He couldn’t move until he knew for sure what this man really was. Yuichi was thinking over the

source of the disconnect when a bizarre phenomenon began to unfold before him that made him doubt his eyes.

The giant's already-bulging muscles had begun to swell even more. It easily far surpassed the region of a bodybuilder's flexing, what the body could do just by focusing blood and lymph.

As he watched, the giant swelled up like a balloon. It was immediately obvious to Yuichi where this was going, and his gut feeling was soon confirmed.

The giant exploded.

His body split open from within, showering his surroundings in blood. Thankfully, Yuichi was far enough away that he wasn't bathed in it, but he was still dumbstruck by the sight.

"Yu! When did you learn how to do that *Fist of the North Star* stuff? I'm stunned!" Mutsuko shouted from the stands.

"I didn't do it!" Yuichi shouted back to his big sister.

"Sakaki! Something's moving!" At Aiko's cry, he turned his eyes back to the giant's remains.

The mass of blood and flesh was moving.

As he watched, something stood up from within: a young man coated in blood.

"Whew. It was getting pretty stuffy in there!" The way the man spit out the words gave them the weight of reality.

"Um... were you... inside that thing?" Yuichi hedged.

The man was about the same height as Yuichi. Size-wise, he could have fit inside it, technically, but it was hard to imagine anyone doing anything that ridiculous.

“That’s right,” the man said.

“Um, I have a lot I could say about that, but never mind. Does this mean you’re my actual opponent?”

“Heh! That armor wasn’t for defense! It was a binding to seal in my overwhelming power!” the man declared.

“Yu! This is a common shonen manga trope! I can’t believe I’m seeing someone actually doing it!” Mutsuko squealed.

“Uh, but it wasn’t armor, it was just some muscly old guy’s body...” His sister was extremely excited, but Yuichi found himself caring less and less.

“By the way... do I look familiar to you, Yuichi Sakaki?” the man questioned.

“Well, you look a little like a character out of a Stephen King movie, but I can’t say we’ve met...” It was hard to recognize anyone with their hair and face slicked down with blood. He basically had only his voice to go on, and that didn’t ring any bells.

“Are you shocked? I’m your older brother, Yuji Sakaki!” the man declared.

“Wh-What did you say?!” Mutsuko shrieked. Despite Yuji’s smug pronouncement, she was the only one who showed a noticeable reaction.

“You’re acting pretty credulous,” Yuichi said. “Do I even have a brother, Sis?”

“Not that I know of! I’ve never heard about any other siblings!”

“Then don’t act so impressed! He could just be spinning a line!”

“Now... let’s find out which of us is the stronger brother!” Yuji hollered. “I intend to prove that no little brother can ever surpass his elder!”

“Look, whatever. I just have to beat you, right?” As stupid as Yuichi was starting to find all this, Yuji’s strength was an unknown quantity. He knew he couldn’t just charge in, but he also had no way of figuring out just how strong Yuji was.

Something tore through the ceiling and fell towards them.

The next instant, a blade-like object was protruding from Yuji’s chest.

Yuji pitched forward, coughing up blood. Standing behind him was a stone statue.

“Um, what the heck is...”

It was a gargoyle: a stone carving of a monster traditionally put on roofs and outer walls to act as rain gutters, that also had evil-warding properties. But why was such a thing moving, let alone showing up in a place like this? Yuichi had no idea.

The gargoyle had remained mute since stabbing Yuji, not moving an inch.

Yuichi had decided to stay where he was and watch carefully, but just then, someone else descended into the arena.

Wearing a black cape and pressing a hand to his forehead — a pose he clearly thought made him look very cool — was Aiko’s big brother, Kyoya Noro. “They have come at last... the vanguard of the demon world’s army!”

“What are you talking about, Kyoya?”

Kyoya had middle school syndrome, like Yuichi’s sister, and in a situation like this it was hard to tell if he was manifesting symp-

toms, or if he was actually telling the truth.

“You know what it is!” Mutsuko called from the stands. “It’s that familiar shonen manga trope where in the middle of a tournament or a test, someone interferes in the fight and throws everything into disarray! It adds to the element of surprise, but frustrates readers wanting to see a proper ending, which makes everything *way* awkward!”

“Stop comparing everything to shonen manga!” Yuichi snapped back. Just then, another two gargoyles dropped down from the hole in the ceiling. “What should I do? I can’t keep up with all this...”

Can I really fight these guys? he was thinking. But as the thought entered his mind, Yuji stood up and slowly began walking towards him.

“Yuichi... I’m sorry... I’d intended to clear them up by myself... would you call me brother... one last time?”

“No way.”

No matter what the man said, he was a total stranger as far as Yuichi was concerned. Even if he was dying, he felt no obligation to say something like that to him.

“Hey, hey, hey, come on! It’s a moving reunion between feuding brothers! How can you not get into this?” Yuji complained.

“You seem surprisingly energetic, so if you want to clear them up, go right ahead.” Yuichi found the idea of fighting statues to be kind of a pain.

“No, I’m definitely on my way out,” the man said. “I leave the rest to you!”

“Do you really? ...Wait, huh?” Yuichi said, startled.

Yuji's body had begun to glow. The light pouring from his body enveloped Yuichi and caused him to start glowing, too. As if this had exhausted the last of his strength, Yuji then collapsed right where he was, and didn't move again.

"Seriously, what the hell is going on here...?"

It was as if they had been waiting for the mystery power to be bestowed, because the moment the light was absorbed by Yuichi, the gargoyles started moving. But then, as if someone else had been waiting for *that* to happen, one of the gargoyles' heads went flying.

It was Natsuki Takeuchi; she had made it down into the arena too, at some point.

"Sakaki, leave this to me and go." She'd always wanted to say that. (At least, he assumed that, given her tone.)

"Um, where exactly am I supposed to go?" he asked.

"Heh! I'll show you what a true vampire can do!" Kyoya attacked a gargoyle, too.

Even Ibaraki showed up to deliver a jump-kick to a third.

All three of them ignored Yuichi, as if high on their own sense of self-sacrificing devotion.

"I want to go home," Yuichi muttered. But just as he thought that, he began to glow and hover. "Huh?"

"Go! Now! Do you want their sacrifice to be in vain?" Mutsuko pleaded with him, tears of emotion streaming down her face.

"But where am I supposed to go?!" he shouted.

"Like, the demon world, I guess?"

“I don’t know where that is!”

But the mysterious power seemed to know. Yuichi rose higher, sucked into the hole that had opened in the ceiling.

Before him lay a world cast in dark red, wreathed in storm-clouds. Barren wastelands covered in jagged rocks, packed with warped, strange monsters. In this place worthy of the name “demon world,” Yuichi fought, alone.

Battered and broken.

But Yuichi smiled confidently.

“Who do you think I am? I’m the little brother of Mutsuko Sakaki, that big sister who lives in a fantasy world, and my name is Yuichi!” Yuichi howled as he raced toward the enemy hordes.

And so Yuichi’s endless battle goes on!

Thank you all for reading!

* * * * *

“What the hell was all that?” Yuichi demanded after enduring Ende’s seemingly interminable narration.

“What do you think? It’s how I kill you,” Ende said. “In other words, that’s how you’ll end up if you defy me. Well? Starting to get afraid yet?”

“Yeah, I’m afraid,” he said. “For your sanity, being able to roll out a story like that in a cafe in broad daylight.”

“Hmph. So you don’t like the ‘our battle continues’ ending, huh? What about a Swordmaster-style ending, dragging everything to a conclusion? Or the revelation that it was all a time

loop? A big tough enemy appears and beats you to a pulp, but you wake up and it's spring vacation, and you restart from the part where you got Soul Reader? Well, I guess that's an offshoot of the 'our battle continues' ending, but it's a bit of a twist at least, right?"

"Look... what exactly are you trying to accomplish?" Yuichi asked. Ende seemed to have a wild imagination at least on par with Mutsuko's.

"The point is, no matter how good a fighter you are, that alone won't get you anywhere," said Ende. "Even if I can't beat you in a hand-to-hand fight, I can think up a strategy to accomplish what I'm after."

"What strategy does it take to get me into an underground martial arts tournament or send me to a demon world?" he demanded. It was so absurd, he could barely even argue. He even found himself missing Mutsuko's delusions.

"Outers have all kinds of powers that let them arrange situations to their advantage," Ende said. "It would be no trouble for me to slot you into some absolutely ridiculous plotline."

"But that doesn't necessarily mean I'd die, does it?"

"Oh? You've got more of a protagonist mindset than I thought. You're only viewing things within the limitations that exist within your own setting and the needs of your story. You think that as long as you work hard, things will probably work out, right?"

That was true. He was fairly confident he could find his way out of any bit of weirdness she got him mixed into.

This wasn't mere arrogance on his part; he thought it was important to take the stance that you would never give up, no matter what happened. As long as you didn't give up, then no matter what situation you found yourself in, there was probably some-

thing you could do. Your situation could always change. Yuichi tried to think that way at all times.

“But let’s say, hypothetically, that an atomic bomb was dropped on you and it exploded,” Ende said. “You’d die, right?”

“That’s a pretty extreme example! You think you can make that happen, huh?”

“I can,” she said. “That’s how Outers work. Of course, it would be difficult to prepare an atomic bomb right here and now, but poison gas could be arranged easily enough. If all I wanted was to kill you, I could do so easily with a little manipulation of your surrounding environment. It’s easy to kill a single person if you don’t care how it’s done. You know that, don’t you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re really gonna drag innocent people into this?”

“No, no, nameless extras don’t count, story-wise. They’re just numbers, there for impact. Of course, knowing you, you might just manage to luck your way out of an atomic bomb or poison gas, too. You’re Mutsuko Sakaki’s little brother, after all.”

“What are you...” The things she was saying sounded like threats, yet she voiced them all so casually.

The most terrifying thing about it was that Ende was serious. Everything she said had the weight of sincerity, even that delusional nonsense from earlier.

“Now, let me ask again,” Ende said. “Will you return to the Divine Vessels War?”

“What happens if I refuse?”

“Good question. I might start with the people who are connected to you on the outermost fringes. There’s a chance that the people close to you may be protected by your worldview, and you

might be able to stop me. But can you protect your distant relatives, your casual playmates from when you were a child, the people you've met that you barely even remember? Maybe I'll have a little killing spree among them just to spite you a little."

"Damn you..." She seemed completely harmless on the outside, but her calm way of speaking about mass murder was a reminder to Yuichi that Outers really were complete garbage.

"Well, I'll ask you again after a few obituaries of your relatives and friends," she said. "Though, since they're unconnected to the story, it'll be a little lacking in dramatic weight."

"You... You'd go that far to get me involved in some stupid game?"

"Calling it stupid is mean to Nergal," she said. "Though I'd agree that the rules are rather arbitrary and tedious, so maybe it is pretty stupid."

"So all I need to do is participate, right?"

"Of course. If you come back of your own volition, I won't have to motivate you, so I won't have to destroy any extras. Like I said before, it's not like killing extras really makes things more exciting."

"First Makina, now you... are all Outers like this?" Yuichi demanded.

"Of course we are. We're absolute garbage, only interested in what's fun. I thought you already knew that, though."

"Let me ask one question. Is it possible to kill all you guys and reach a 'happy end' storyline?"

Most people wouldn't even bother asking something like that of an enemy, but Yuichi had a feeling Ende might just take him up on it.

Ende froze up, mouth slightly agape. After a moment, she began to laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, well, I never even imagined that scenario. That could be fun in its own way. But that’s all down the line, isn’t it? You should probably deal with the situation right in front of you first.”

“I never said I was rejoining the war.”

Yuichi didn’t *have* to. But Ende was going to do whatever it took to get him to come back, and taking the bigger picture into account, he was starting to think that it was probably the better option just to play along.

“So, what do you want me to do?” he asked, at length.

“I want you to go looking for a young man named Ryoma Takei, find him, and fight him.”

“Who’s that?” he asked. Since she wanted Yuichi to return to the Divine Vessels War, that guy was probably a participant. He would need a Divine Vessel to get back into the war, so maybe that was what this was about.

“As you’ve inferred, he’s a Divine Vessel host,” Ende said. “He’s also a pawn I’ve prepared for your sake.”

“I don’t quite follow. I understand that you want me to fight him and take his Divine Vessel, but what do you mean by ‘go looking for him’?” Yuichi wouldn’t want to fight Ryoma unless he determined him to be a shady character, but he could determine that after he met him.

Therefore, he didn’t mind looking for him — but the fact that Ende had asked him to go looking suggested that she didn’t know where he was, either.

“Ryoma’s label is ‘Protagonist.’”

“Protagonist, huh?” he said. “Does that make me a side character? But isn’t everyone the protagonist of their own life?”

“I don’t mean it in that trite way,” she said. “He’s a bit special. Monika explained to you a bit about worldviews, didn’t she? It’s all based on that.”

“I more or less grasp it.”

“Each worldview has a personification — a Worldview Holder. But while a Worldview Holder is definitely that world’s central figure, they’re not necessarily that world’s protagonist. There are worldviews that don’t have protagonists, too, of course.”

“Could you dumb it down a little for me?” Yuichi was genuinely still having a hard time understanding it all.

“Oh, put simply, he’ll overshadow you, like a protagonist swap, if we’re comparing worldviews to stories. Ryoma, a character from another story, is going to take over your world’s protagonist role.”

“So what?” Yuichi asked.

“Huh? He’ll be the protagonist. Don’t you find that threatening at all?” Ende’s eyes widened. She seemed surprised by his reaction. “Fighting a protagonist makes things pretty grim. Things always conspire to make sure the protagonist wins in the end, after all. That’s why I didn’t go with the atomic bomb or poison gas I mentioned earlier.”

“I think you just can’t actually arrange that kind of stuff,” he said.

“No, it’s because you’re a protagonist. Protagonists are sheltered to an absurd degree. Villains can’t use attacks that are totally inescapable, because no matter how bad things get, the pro-

tagonist needs to preserve some chance of winning. Even if it's absurd. That's why villains tend to be idiots who never even consider their most efficient options. Don't you think that's unfair?"

"You're a little too eager to sympathize with villains," he said. "Anyway, I feel like we're getting off the subject. Does this mean you don't know where this guy Ryoma is?"

"Yeah. Ryoma's a protagonist but he'd never made use of the fact. So I tried cracking his shell a little... but I went too far and he went crazy."

"You..." Yuichi was dumbstruck by Ende's tone. She might as well have been saying "my bad."

"So then he ran off somewhere, and I don't quite know what to do."

"Can't you use your powers to tell where he is?"

"Since a protagonist has the power to alter worldviews, it makes him harder for us Outers to read. Typically when it comes to worldview manipulation, it's all about whoever acts first."

"Any clues?" Yuichi asked.

"I think he means to participate in the Divine Vessels War, so he'll probably be searching for those. But I can't be totally sure about that, either."

"How irresponsible can you get?" Yuichi was utterly disgusted by how little she seemed to care about the mess she had caused.

"At first I'd planned to manipulate him to get him to attack you. But that doesn't seem like it'll work now, so I changed my plan to have you attack him instead."

"That's not exactly a plan," Yuichi shot back. "And you said that if I don't fight him, you'll kill the people around me? You're

really an awful person.”

“Yeah, I am. So, what now?”

It seemed his only choice was to go along with her ridiculous offer. Outers didn’t seem like they’d do anything too crazy as long as things were generally following their plot outlines. If things ended up getting too out of hand, the stories as they perceived them would fall apart.

Ende didn’t just want to defeat Yuichi. She wanted to make sure it happened in a way that was enjoyable and interesting. Which meant that she would probably keep her promise.

“So I just have to go looking for this Ryoma guy, right?” he said. “I’ll do it. But you need to give me some clues on how to find him. If you don’t, I could just wander around town all day claiming I’m looking for him, right?”

He’d be technically keeping his promise then, and Ende couldn’t go after anyone he knew. An Outer wouldn’t just overlook the potential for that, surely.

“Let me see,” she said. “The last place I saw him was in my library. A hero girl fell from the ceiling, and they beat a hasty retreat together.”

“A hero girl, huh?” Yuichi only knew one person who could fit that description. It sounded like Yurika Maruyama. He couldn’t imagine many other girls who said crazy enough things to qualify.

Yuichi tried remembering everything he knew about Yurika.

She was a first-year student at Seishin High.

She called herself a hero.

She was a Divine Vessel host with the ability was to turn whatever she held into a weapon.

Her ally was a priest who used Bajiquan.

She seemed to know Natsuki Takeuchi.

That was about it.

Today was Sunday. If he went to school tomorrow, he might run into her. But what concerned him was Ende mentioning that she was on the run from something.

She seemed to be earnestly engaging with the Divine Vessels War, so if he got too complacent, he might lose his only lead.

Yuichi pulled out his cell phone and dialed Natsuki's number.

"This is unusual," Natsuki said, answering it. "I hardly ever get phone calls from you."

"How are you holding up? Are you still in the hospital?" he asked.

"I got out today. I'm back at home. Takizawa seems like she'll be there for a while longer, though. Did you just call to check up on me?"

"No. You know Yurika Maruyama, right?" Yurika had been fervently searching for Natsuki after she went missing, which suggested they knew each other fairly well.

"I do. What about her?"

"I'm searching for a man who's apparently on the run with her. Do you have any idea where she might be?"

"I don't understand why you're asking about this."

"Um, did you know she's calling herself a hero?" Yuichi hedged.

“She did mention some nonsense like that, yes.”

“And it seems like she’s a Divine Vessel host.”

“I’m still not following. What do you want me to do?”

“Let’s see... do you know her phone number?” he asked.

Calling her seemed like the fastest way to find her. If she answered, he could at least confirm she was alive, and he might even be able to ask where she was.

“I don’t. She acted like we were friends, but I didn’t care about her.”

What an unhelpful response.

“That sounds like a pretty desolate relationship...” Yuichi muttered.

“Could you wait a minute? Maruyama’s house is next to mine, so I’ll check.” With that, she hung up.

She called him back a few minutes later.

“It seems she hasn’t been back home since yesterday. Though apparently such things happen occasionally, so her mother isn’t terribly worried.”

“I see. Thanks. I’ll get searching on my own, then.”

“Sakaki, where are you now?” Natsuki asked.

“A cafe near the station.”

“I’ll meet up with you there. It would be easier to find her if you’re with someone she knows well, right?”

Since Yuichi barely knew the girl at all, he had to admit that

was true. He gave Natsuki more detailed information on his location, then hung up.

“And that’s that. I’m doing everything I can, so don’t do anything crazy, okay?” Yuichi warned Ende.

“Certainly. As long as you’re displaying real enthusiasm, I have no need to get involved... though I think you’re the kind of person trouble inevitably finds anyway.”

Yuichi grimaced.

He’d gotten involved in a lot of strange things in the past, it was true. The reason he’d wanted to get rid of Soul Reader was because he was sick of it all, but that was almost feeling like too much to hope for now.

“So, is this the end of our talk?” he demanded.

“I think so. But someone’s on the way here, if you’ll wait around a little bit. I’d like to introduce you; do you mind?”

“They just happen to be coming here, right? Or did you ask someone to come?” Yuichi felt a little dubious about the latter, as Ende had shown no signs of calling someone here either on their way here or after they arrived.

“I asked them,” Ende said. “See, I can see a little bit of the future. That’s why I told them to come here in advance.”

“Well, I have to meet with Takeuchi here, so that should be fine.” Though it wasn’t like they had anything to talk about in the meantime.

Minutes passed in awkward silence. Yuichi was just starting to think about leaving when Ende spoke up with a triumphant expression.

“I think it’s almost time. Look out the window, would you?”

Wondering if it would be someone he was surprised to see, Yuichi did as he was told. But when he looked outside, he didn't see anything special. It was just a road with lots of people and a few cars passing by.

"There's nothing there," he said.

Just then, someone approached.

A large man walked right up to the window beyond which Yuichi and Ende were sitting and peered inside.

Yuichi recognized him, though they had barely spoken; it was Sakiyama, the stalker who served as Natsuki's subordinate.

"Is he a friend of yours? Or did Takeuchi send him?" Yuichi asked.

It was just about the time when Natsuki might show up, so maybe Sakiyama had come with her. That was his best guess about what was going on.

Sakiyama's eyes were vacant as he gazed at Yuichi. He definitely seemed to have some business with him, but he was still acting strangely. Although he was just standing there, there was something twisted about his posture, and his center of gravity was unsteady. His face was ash pale, and there were traces of suturing across his neck.

Huh? There's something strange about his aura, Yuichi realized. It's like he's not actually human...

He looked like a walking corpse.

The moment that thought entered Yuichi's head, Sakiyama began to move, sluggishly, raising a fist behind him.

"Damn!" Yuichi glared at Ende, wondering if he'd fallen for some sort of trap of hers.

But Ende looked surprised, too. “This wasn’t the person I was expecting. What should I do?”

“I don’t care!”

Yuichi was torn. She was an enemy, and in that respect, he felt no obligation to help her. At the same time, she still looked like an ordinary girl, which made him hesitant to just abandon her.

“Hey, now,” she said. “If you have to think about it, you might as well save me. You can’t just ignore a beautiful girl in distress.”

“I thought Outers couldn’t die!” he snapped.

But Outers weren’t truly invincible. They were, simply put, extremely lucky, which meant that it *was* possible for them to get hurt under certain circumstances.

Yuichi picked up Ende and began running for it.

A moment later, the window glass broke in with a crash.

“Dammit! What’s going on?” he shouted.

The cafe was in chaos. The customers, seeing the bizarre scene unfold, began to flee, unable to resist the urge to rush like a mob for the building’s one small entrance. Yuichi was starting to think he should probably stop coming to this cafe.

“Hmm, the customer evacuation isn’t going well. Though I doubt you want to fight him here,” Ende said in amusement, clinging to him as he carried her.

“Just to make sure, he’s not after you, is he?” Yuichi demanded.

“No way. You know I exist outside of destiny, right? I’ll never be heroine-pursued-by-evildoers material, sad though it may be.”

“So it’s definitely me... I seem to make trouble for this cafe every time I come... though I’m not sure it’s really my fault...” Still, if Yuichi was the one drawing his enemies here, then he did feel some responsibility.

“That’s Sakiyama, Natsuki’s subordinate,” Ende commented. “But it’s strange... I thought he was dead.”

“Wait a minute! What do you mean, he was dead?”

“Remember how Natsuki was being pursued by Nergal’s underlings recently? Sakiyama was killed by one of them. See his neck? Look at the sloppy way his head has been sewn on.”

“None of this makes any sense,” Yuichi complained. “If he was dead, then why is he alive now? And coming after me?!”

It was possible that Sakiyama held a grudge against him over Natsuki. But if that was the case, it seemed awfully sudden.

“How heartless can a guy get?” Ende asked. “Someone you know has died, and that’s all the feeling you can muster?”

“Look, it’s a little hard to feel sympathy when they’re walking around and attacking you!”

“Fair point. So, what now? Going to try to fight in the cafe?”

“Sakaki!” Natsuki fought her way through the fleeing customers to arrive next to Yuichi. “What’s going on here?”

“I don’t know!” he called back. “Sakiyama just attacked us!”

“Sakiyama... how...”

Sakiyama was in the process of climbing through the window frame to get inside. Seeing a corpse up and walking around was certainly unsettling, but his nature also meant that his movements were sluggish; it would be easy to just run away from him.

“He seems to be dead,” Yuichi said. “Did you know about this?”

As Natsuki noticed Sakiyama, a hint of dismay entered her expression. “Yes. I saw him decapitated.”

“Anyway, we can’t stay here. We should try to get some distance for now.”

“Are you sure about that?” Ende asked. “What if you run, and he starts attacking people indiscriminately? It wouldn’t be very good for your ‘paragon of justice’ image.”

She was right, but they couldn’t just fight in such a populated area. They had to find a way to get somewhere else. The police would probably show up soon, too, which meant they had no time to lose.

“Let’s try to lead him to the back alleys,” Yuichi said. “I’ve heard it’s hard for people to come there.”

He and the others headed for the exit. Sakiyama was still moving sluggishly, and couldn’t keep up with them.

The customers were all gone now, so it would probably be easy enough to leave. But as they were heading for the door, it opened, and someone else entered.

It was a woman dressed in an anachronistic style, with a silk hat and an old-style black riding dress. She was staring straight at Natsuki.

“Natsuki dear, it’s been such a long time. I came to play with your boyfriend, but seeing you here, too, why... as your big sister, I’m so surprised...”

The woman looked overjoyed.

Chapter 4: Necromancer and Stalker Versus Serial Killer and Strongest Little Brother

An intruder had broken the window to get into the cafe, and the customers had all fled.

A group of five men and women now faced off against each other.

Sakiyama was the one who'd broken the window to enter the cafe, but now he was just standing there. The woman in the black riding dress, who had called herself Natsuki's big sister, was standing between them and the exit. Yuichi, Natsuki, and Ende were sandwiched between the two apparently-hostile presences who'd appeared out of nowhere.

Ende was smiling as if she found all of this very exciting, while Natsuki wasn't even trying to hide her displeasure.

Yuichi cast a sympathetic glance at her. "Um, not to butt in on your family situation, but I guess we're both having troubles with our big sisters..."

Of course, he thought, maybe this was just how big sisters were the world over: self-righteous, arrogant, and overflowing with confidence.

"She's not my big sister," Natsuki replied with a scowl. "She's one of Nergal's fourteen servants. Her name's Alberta."

That meant Yuichi was definitely the one being targeted. But it also changed things.

“What do you want?” Yuichi demanded. “We had a deal with Nergal. He said he’d leave us alone.”

Yuichi had won his game with Nergal, and Nergal had said he would keep his promise.

“Mm, I think you might be misremembering,” the woman told him. “Master Nergal’s precise words were, ‘If you win, I’ll let you go. I’ll allow for you to leave this place unharmed, and for Natsuki to remain as she is. I’ll even throw in a promise to never come after Natsuki again.’ So? I’m sure it’s fine for me to come after people who *aren’t* Natsuki.”

“Oh, for the love of... If I’d known, I would’ve asked for a more all-encompassing promise.”

“But that means you do have to leave me alone, doesn’t it? So I think you should go.” Natsuki took a step forward and glared at her.

It was true that if the promise was in effect, the woman should never be able to touch Natsuki again.

“Well, it’s *true* that Nergal rescinded his order for us to search for you,” the woman said. “But I still have my own personal business with you, unrelated to his.”

“Talk about splitting hairs...” If that was possible, Yuichi thought, she could argue whatever she wanted to. He grumbled to himself about how subordinates should really be more true to the spirit of an oath. “Anyway, you said you had business with me?”

“Oh, I did... but if Natsuki’s here, I don’t need you anymore,” the woman said carelessly. “I was planning to kidnap her boyfriend to lure her to me. I thought it might be fun to chop you to pieces and show them to her, or perhaps send her a picture of the two of us making love?”

“Boyfriend...” Natsuki murmured. “You disgust me, Alberta, but sometimes I like the things you say.”

“Takeuchi... did you not hear the other things she said?” Yuichi asked incredulously. He didn’t feel like he could let an unsettling comment like that slide.

“Sakaki, be careful,” Natsuki replied. “I think they’re both dead. Sakiyama was decapitated, and Alberta was chopped to bits by Takizawa.”

“They don’t look dead to me...”

“It seems Alberta’s a necromancer. She must be moving her own corpse around.”

“How are you supposed to move yourself around when you’re dead...?” Yuichi began. It made no sense to him at all, but he decided to give up on trying to understand it. What mattered was that both Alberta and Sakiyama were his enemies, and that they were after him. That made things feel a lot simpler.

Natsuki drew into a combat stance. Yuichi stood stock still and opened his senses to everything around him. Alberta wasn’t their only enemy; there was Sakiyama behind them, too.

“It really hurt, you see,” Alberta said casually. “I wasn’t expecting to die in a place like that. I don’t know how I’ll go about living the rest of my life.”

“Why not just die, then?” Natsuki snapped.

“Oh, yes,” Alberta said smoothly, either nonplussed by Natsuki’s biting retort or simply ignoring it. “You asked what I wanted, didn’t you? Revenge, of course.”

“The way that I recall the situation is that you had me at your mercy,” Natsuki said. “I didn’t do anything to earn your ire.”

“But if I try to take revenge against Aki, I’ll just lose.”

“In other words, you want to vent your frustration,” Natsuki said.

“Mm, more or less. The body I have right now is one I stole after forcing my way into a family home — my original body was chopped up too badly to recover, you see — but it must be a bad match, because I can’t seem to stop it from decomposing.”

Yuichi felt vaguely sick as he realized what Alberta’s casual words implied.

“So I was thinking, as a fellow servant of Nergal, my compatibility with you might be just a bit better. So, Natsuki dear... give me your body, would you?” With that, Alberta flipped up the skirt of her riding dress and drew a weapon from within.

It was a whip. Despite her outfit, it wasn’t a riding crop, but a bullwhip, of the sort an animal tamer might use.

“Hey, this is getting pretty exciting,” Ende commented. “I don’t think it has anything to do with me, though, so I might just sit back and watch... wait, I know. Since it’s no fun to see a big battle setup like this interrupted, I’ll set up a ward to keep people away. I’ll even do it for free.”

As if seeing that the battle was about to start, Ende moved to the back of the cafe and sat down in a random chair. Then she pulled out her smartphone and placed a call. Yuichi wasn’t sure what she was doing that would keep people away, but all he could do was let her handle it.

Alberta didn’t even glance at Ende as she swung her whip directly at Natsuki.

But the whip didn’t reach her. Yuichi had grabbed the tip.

“Huh?” Alberta asked, agape. She seemed to have great confi-

dence in her skill with the whip, and likely hadn't been expecting the first attack to be stopped.

“Sakaki, you can catch whips?” Natsuki asked.

“Yeah, I'm used to it.”

There were theories that a whip's attacks could exceed the speed of sound. In reality, it was dubious that any whip meant for attacking could exceed the speed of sound, but naturally, the fantastical concept appealed greatly to Mutsuko. Because of that, Mutsuko had developed a whip that really did exceed the speed of sound, and had used it on Yuichi many times before. Thanks to that, he'd learned how to cope with even the most unpredictable high-speed attacks.

“Takeuchi, you do something about Sakiyama,” he ordered. “I'll handle the whip lady.”

“I will,” Natsuki agreed. “Watch out for any spikes she might throw; if they strike you, you'll be cursed.”

“That's not much of a warning...”

Natsuki turned to face Sakiyama.

Yuichi looked at Alberta again. There was something strange about her center of balance; she must have had even more heavy weapons under her skirt.

He estimated, from that one whip strike, that she was a little bit stronger than Natsuki. It was hard for him to say whether she was really “dead” or not, but there was definitely something awkward about her movements. Altogether, she wasn't that strong, Yuichi determined.

“It looks like you aren't an amateur... But I can't have you getting a big head just because you anticipated one little attack.” Alberta released the whip and flung her skirt up theatrically.

The thighs he glimpsed beneath the skirt were, as he'd thought, equipped with a plethora of weapons.

Alberta grabbed a few of them and threw them at him in one smooth motion. A spike went flying right at him from her right hand. From her left hand came a disc-shaped weapon, a chakram, that traced a curve as it flew at him.

Yuichi closed the space between him and Alberta and snagged the chakram out of the air. He also dodged the spike, just to be safe.

"Sorry, I'm used to chakrams, too," he told her. His big sister Mutsuko had developed a weapon called a chakram shooter; naturally, she'd tested it on Yuichi, so he knew how they worked, too.

"I knew long-range weapons wouldn't work from the moment you grabbed the whip!" she snapped.

Apparently Alberta had just been using the projectiles to limit his range of motion, as she quickly hefted a hand-ax in a double-handed grip and swung it at Yuichi as he approached. But Yuichi was already in her personal space before she could finish the blow.

He held back her arms' descent from below, then crossed them. As her center of balance shifted upwards, he slammed a palm into her vulnerable chest.

But there was something dubious about the way the strike broke her ribs and crushed her lungs; he was sure he hadn't hit her hard enough to do that.

So Yuichi flew back, getting space between them as Alberta doubled over.

"Looks like you really are dead," he said.

Alberta's body was brittle, containing none of the sustaining

life force of a living human's body.

Seeing a corpse moving around inspired a certain degree of primal terror, but it appeared to be, in itself, a fairly easy thing to fight.

Though normally, crushing a person's lungs would end the battle...

People couldn't move if they couldn't breathe, but that didn't seem to matter when the body was already dead.

Alberta looked up from the place where she was crouching, and grinned.

Yuichi put up a hand casually to grab the thing whizzing at him from behind.

Alberta's face twisted in surprise.

"I told you, I'm used to chakrams," Yuichi said. He was holding a chakram made of transparent material. When she'd initially thrown the first, she'd probably thrown another on a wider arc.

It's trouble, though...

He could beat her, certainly, but she seemed like she'd take a lot of work to knock out. He'd have to bludgeon her into immobility, but he was hesitant to go that far against a woman.

He glanced behind him to see how Natsuki was doing. She'd cut Sakiyama neatly up into a pile of immobile pieces. She hadn't seemed to show a moment's hesitation.

Perhaps because the body was already dead, there was nearly no blood.

"I'm finished," Natsuki said. "What about you?"

“I feel a little bad for Sakiyama, but...” Yuichi said. The man might have been a stalker, but he still thought the man deserved a little more feeling than that.

Natsuki walked up next to him; now it was two against one. Alberta winced, seeming to realize she was at a disadvantage.

“What’s going on here? I can’t lose to people like you! No, I know! It’s this body that’s the problem! I never should have chosen this weak little body!” Alberta shouted.

Yuichi thought Alberta might be setting up for an escape; her shrill cries were probably a bluff. She just wanted to distract them long enough to get away.

“Takeuchi, what should we do with her?” he asked. Ende’s ward seemed to be working, but they also needed to act soon. Normally, he wouldn’t mind if an enemy wanted to run away. But the way she was acting, Alberta might come back again with a stronger body.

“I think we’ll have to kill her,” Natsuki said. “Don’t worry, even if the police find her, she’s already a corpse, so the time of death won’t finger us. At worst, we’ll get off with desecration of a corpse.”

“I wasn’t asking about the legal ramifications... should we contact Nergal? Maybe he can pick her up...”

This was all Nergal’s fault for failing to adhere to his promise. Yuichi felt he had responsibility to come here and collect her.

“You know... Sakaki, you can be extremely insensitive sometimes,” Natsuki said with a frown.

“Ah... right, we can’t do that. Sorry.” It seemed the antipathy between Natsuki and Nergal was deeper than he’d imagined.

“If you can’t do it, Sakaki, I will.” Natsuki strode forward, ap-

parently thinking they'd make no progress if she left the matter to him.

He was just about to warn her not to let her guard down, that Alberta might not be completely out of the fight — when suddenly, it was all over. Alberta's head tumbled off of her shoulders.

Judging by the shocked expression on her face as her head rolled around on the floor, not even Alberta herself knew exactly what had happened.

“Takeuchi, did you do that?” Yuichi asked. He was sure that no one present had done anything, but he had to ask anyway.

“If I had a move that would work at this distance, I would have used it already.”

“You know it wasn't me either, of course,” Ende added from the distant place from which she'd been watching the battle.

There were no customers or servers around, either; they were the only ones present.

“What happened?” Yuichi looked at Alberta. Her head really had been sheared clean off, with a cut as smooth as if it had been done with a sharp sword.

“I don't know. I'm as surprised as you are,” Alberta's head admitted as it rolled along the floor.

Even the one who'd been decapitated didn't know, it seemed.

“If my big sis were here, she'd say ‘is it a new Stand user?!’ or something...” Yuichi snarked, but at the same time, he knew that this was a seriously dangerous situation. If this had been an attack, that meant the person behind it could kill without warning.

If the enemy is nearby and has to see what they're attacking, that's a little better, at least...

It might be wishful thinking, but if that wasn't the case, then they were all fish in a barrel.

Yuichi opened his senses, searching for a presence.

He could tell that someone was outside. A moment later, the cafe door opened, and a girl carrying a sword came in.

It was Yurika Maruyama.

Previously her weapons had been converted from toy swords, but what she was carrying now appeared to be a genuine broadsword. She was also wearing proper armor, unlike before. It wasn't exactly full plate, of course, but she had a headpiece, a breastplate, gauntlets, and leg coverings to protect all her vitals.

"Ah! Hey, look, look! The Brave Slash I just learned actually hit!" Yurika called out the door after seeing the condition of things inside the cafe.

"Don't just whip that stuff out! You scared the hell out of me!" Another person entered, bristling with annoyance. It was a sullen-looking boy wearing a uniform for the same school as Ende's.

"Don't worry," Yurika assured him. "My skills only hit monsters I'm in an encounter with. But once I've encountered them, they can even slice through walls to get at them."

The two were looking at Alberta, which meant they probably weren't here for Yuichi and Natsuki.

"That's Maruyama... which means that guy there is Ryoma Takei?" Yuichi murmured. Which would mean that Yuichi hadn't even had to search; the person he had been looking for had come right at him.

They'd been through so much that he'd almost forgotten how this all started, but he now remembered that Ende mentioning

that someone was coming.

“Sakaki, Maruyama’s here,” Natsuki said. “Didn’t you need to talk to her?”

“I did, but uh... given the situation, I’d... sort of like to leave things to them and run away...” Yuichi had been hoping to leave the rest to Yurika and run along home, but the presence of this boy, who might be Ryoma, had complicated things.

If it was him, then Yuichi’s objective of finding him had been effortlessly met, but he hadn’t actually decided yet what he’d do once he found the guy.

I’m supposed to fight him, right?

Ende seemed to want Ryoma and Yuichi to fight, but from the way she was talking, it seemed she was going to just let it happen rather than trying to force it. But a fight probably wasn’t going to spring up under these conditions. Yuichi didn’t have a Divine Vessel, so Ryoma had no reason to fight him, and Yuichi didn’t feel like picking a fight just to get Ryoma’s.

“Ah! Natsuki! What are you doing here? I’ve been looking everywhere!” Yurika cried theatrically as she noticed her friend. “Look! I’ve been running around everywhere searching for you, and I leveled up a ton and got a new party member!” Yurika stepped over Alberta’s body to approach Yuichi and Natsuki.

“I’m glad to see you’ve acquired a proper set of equipment,” Natsuki said.

“You see a friend dressed like that, and that’s the first thing you say?” Yuichi watched the two of them, suddenly feeling drained.

“Sakaki, too... what are you doing here?” Yurika asked, sounding surprised to see him.

“I could ask you the same question,” he returned. “By the way, is that guy’s name Ryoma Takei?” Yuichi pointed at the boy.

“Yeah, it is. He’s in my party. His job class is Goof-Off.”

Ryoma was in the process of picking up Alberta’s head. “Are you the one who killed Mio and my big sister? Where’s Kotori?” His voice was cold as ice, with all emotion stifled.

“Oh, please. Do you know how many people I’ve killed?” Alberta responded in a mocking tone. “I don’t ask the name of every single one. Use some common sense!”

Ryoma threw her head against the wall with all his might.

“What violence,” Natsuki said, a bit disgustedly.

“Yeah, I feel like we shouldn’t be watching this. Is it okay for us to be here? I’d really like to go home.” Yuichi felt like he’d been shuffled off of center stage and into the wings, like he’d been dragged suddenly into someone else’s plotline.

“We stopped by Ryoma’s home and found his childhood friend and big sister dead, and his little sister missing,” Yurika explained. “We went searching for the killer, and it led us here.”

“How did you find her?” Yuichi asked. It would be one thing if they’d caught her in the act, but it didn’t seem possible for a pair of novices to track a killer who had already left the scene of the crime.

“The resonance,” Yurika said. “Apparently the culprit had a Divine Vessel, and it was still resonating, so we just followed that.”

“The resonance lets you tell where Divine Vessels are,” Yuichi nodded. “But how did you know that the criminal had one?”

“Once you get used to it, you can sense lingering resonance,”

Yurika explained. “In other words, you can vaguely identify places an enemy used to be. I guess it’s because they don’t want people just running away all the time when the war enters its final stages...”

If that was to be believed, then either Alberta or her borrowed body must have been a Divine Vessel host.

Isn’t this all a little contrived? Yuichi thought. It felt like all of the elements of the story were conspiring, like someone had arranged for them all to fight here and now.

Yuichi cast a glance at Ende, who was watching from a distance. He didn’t know what was going through her mind, exactly, but she really seemed to be enjoying herself.

“Isn’t a hero supposed to get info by talking to people in town?” he asked.

“Oh, I have that skill, too, but when I used it, everyone just started repeating the same thing over and over again, and it got kind of creepy...” Yurika responded.

The whole time they were speaking, Ryoma had been approaching Alberta’s body. He crouched and listened at her chest. Then, upon noticing a mole next to her collarbone, he let out a howl of anger.

“I knew it was you!” Ryoma grabbed Alberta’s head in one hand and squeezed.

“He knows where all his little sister’s moles are? Isn’t that a bit creepy?” Natsuki commented.

“Why are you asking me?” Yuichi replied.

Alberta’s body was apparently that of Ryoma’s little sister. He didn’t know all the details, but apparently Alberta, having been

killed by Aki, had gone off searching for a body she could use, broken into Ryoma's house, killed his little sister, and stolen her body.

"It's certainly a tragedy, but it feels like it's none of our business," Natsuki stated bluntly.

"Yeah, I think you're right..." Yuichi scratched his head.

It was so sudden, it was hard for him to feel sympathy for Ryoma. It was like tuning in to a soap opera he had never watched before, right in the middle of an episode.

"But by the way, you really shouldn't underestimate me," Alberta said. "Did you really think I'm helpless when I'm just a head?"

Suddenly, Alberta's hair began to grow. It wound itself around Ryoma's hand, crawled up his arm, and began to bind his entire body.

"Urgh..." Ryoma let out a groan as the hair began to coil around him. Soon, he was encased in a black cocoon of hair. Bound head to toe, it seemed unlikely that he could possibly break free. It was looking far more likely that he'd end up smothered to death.

"I see. I was wondering how Alberta managed to grab someone's body when she was just a head. So she can do that, too..." Natsuki said, sounding rather impressed, despite the bizarre scene in front of them.

"What should I do? Should I help him?" Yuichi asked.

He still couldn't help thinking it was none of his business. For some reason, he couldn't shake the feeling that he shouldn't interfere.

He turned to Yurika. "Hey, Maruyama, isn't he in your party?"

Shouldn't you help him?" he urged. She seemed to know Ryoma, so maybe it would be appropriate for her to interfere.

"I'd like to, but if I try to attack, it'll probably hit him, too," Yurika responded, eyes narrowed.

Ryoma had been holding Alberta's head in his right hand, which she had forced behind his back. It would certainly be hard to hit just the head under these conditions.

"What about that slash you used that went through the wall?" Yuichi replied. "Can't you use that?"

"I'm not sure if it'll discriminate between targets now that they're joined together like that..."

"It's looking like he's beyond hope, so maybe I should just kill them both and put him out of his misery?" Natsuki offered, seeming to find the whole situation annoying.

"Natsuki, you..." Yuichi was about to scold her, but suddenly, there was movement from Ryoma's end.

He released a howl, which grew and grew in volume.

Then the mass of Alberta's hair began to swell, as if a powerful pressure was being exerted from within. The hair couldn't stand against it.

Bam! In a deafening burst, Alberta's hair went flying, torn to shreds.

"What in the world...?" Yuichi murmured in disbelief as he watched Ryoma emerge from within.

His entire body had begun to shine.

Ryoma raised his right hand, still holding Alberta's head in it.

“Huh? Wait, wait, I’m feeling a creak... stop it! I can’t afford to lose any more of myself!” Alberta screamed.

Ryoma, consumed by rage, had begun squeezing Alberta’s head. The light subsuming his body began to focus in the lone hand holding Alberta.

“Natsuki dear, save me!”

But of course, Natsuki was under no obligation to save her, and Alberta’s head ended up crushed.

Perhaps because she had been using necromancy to prolong her life, the crushed head released no splatter of blood. It just turned to dust, which scattered across the floor. Alberta’s and Sakiyama’s bodies both turned to dust and crumbled, too.

Silence fell.

“Well, it looks like it’s all over now... do you think we can go home?” Yuichi whispered.

“I suppose,” Natsuki said. “But didn’t you call me out here because you wanted to find Maruyama?”

If he did just go home, it would mean that Natsuki had wasted her time coming here. Yuichi was just thinking about how he didn’t want to do that, when Ende moved into action.

“Yuichi Sakaki! Have a look at this, would you?” Ende walked towards Alberta’s remains and pointed. There was a strikingly white rib buried deep in her remains.

“Is that... a Divine Vessel?” he asked.

“Yes. A Divine Vessel, reverted to its initial state without you needing to dirty your hands to get it. Now you can take it as a host. You can gain its divine power, and use its resonance to find the other parts.”

“Hey... did you plan it all so things would turn out this way?” he demanded. It was certainly sounding that way, but Ende’s only response was a cryptic smile.

Just then, the previously silent Ryoma howled out. “Don’t you dare! That’s Kotori’s body! I won’t let you people have it!”

Ryoma’s body began to glow even brighter. The light erupted powerfully in time with Ryoma’s release of anger. It was now as if his entire body was wreathed in flame. He’d gone completely berserk.

Yuichi was feeling a creeping realization that he wasn’t going to be able to talk his way out of this.

“Okay! Awakening event complete!”

But Ryoma’s manner changed on a dime. In an instant, any trace of the tragic protagonist seeking to avenge his little sister was gone.

“The ‘Do you want power?’ trigger is a little meh these days, but the other options weren’t exactly great, either,” he said flatly. “So, who are you anyway? Some ordinary person who just got mixed up in this?” Ryoma asked, looking down his nose at them.

“Huh? What? When did you start acting this way?” Even Yurika was shocked by the sudden change.

“Let’s see... What’ll our next event be?”

Ryoma was suddenly holding five cards in his right hand. Yuichi had no idea where he’d plucked them from.

The young man inspected each of them closely. “Oh, so this is Yuichi Sakaki. I was told I was supposed to beat him, so I guess I’d better kill him now,” he said without hesitation, glancing at Yuichi.

“But why? That doesn’t make any sense!” Yuichi protested.

“I was told you’d be my biggest obstacle in the Divine Vessels War. So I’d better just kill you while I have the chance, right?”

“You need to think this over a little more,” Yuichi said. “You can’t just talk about killing people like this. Is your wish really so important you’re willing to kill for it?”

He knew that he was unlikely to talk Ryoma down, but he at least needed to try to find a way to a ceasefire. Even if it was all just lip service, it was important to Yuichi to try. It might still turn out that fighting was the only way, but he wouldn’t be able to get serious unless he’d positively exhausted all other options.

“My wish?” Ryoma asked. “It’s to live a peaceful, ordinary life.”

“Come on, then!” Yuichi shouted.

It seemed self-evident to Yuichi that you could never live a peaceful life after killing people, but Ryoma kept talking nevertheless. “They say the Evil God can grant any wish. Which means that no matter what I do, I’ll get my peaceful life in the end, right? So what does it matter if I kill people? Once I get my wish, the rest will sort itself out. So logically speaking, it makes sense to resort to absolutely anything as long as it means I win. Right?”

Not only was this guy weird, he seemed to have an utterly bizarre take on the world. Yuichi determined there was no way to avoid a fight.

“I’d heard you were a ‘Protagonist,’ but ‘I’ll kill anyone who stands in my way’ is a pretty dime-a-dozen villain speech, don’t you think?” Yuichi asked.

“Hmm? Oh, I see, Ende’s here too,” Ryoma said. “Did she tell you about that? Don’t worry, a protagonist will always angst a lit-

tle bit about killing people, but give him a few words of comfort, and he's right back on his feet. Besides, you guys were working with the killer, so I'm totally justified."

Yuichi had no idea what Ryoma was talking about, but he decided it might be best to ignore it. It was all nonsense anyway; listening to it would just confuse him.

Ryoma made a move. He threw one of the cards he was holding into the air.

Yuichi braced for an attack, but the card merely flew upwards, then vanished into light.

"Event: Someone precious to Ryoma was killed by Alberta and Yuichi Sakaki. Ryoma fights Yuichi, wins, and gains even greater power."

The voice that spoke those words seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

It didn't seem to be an attack, and what the voice had said had seemed like total nonsense. Yet Yuichi felt a sinking feeling in his gut.

It reminded him too much of the words of power that Makina Shikitani had used.

"Stay right where you are. Or do you want me to kill her?" At some point, Natsuki had gotten around behind Yurika, and was holding a medical scalpel to her neck.

Yurika looked startled. "Huh? What? Aren't we friends?"

"Yes, and it pains me to have to do this to a friend, but you've left me no choice." Natsuki let out a theatrical sigh.

"You do have a choice! And that blade is digging into my neck!"

“Whenever I see a TV show with a scene like this, I think... if the blade isn’t making contact, you can’t slice their throat right away, so it’s not much of a threat. Don’t worry. It’s buried five millimeters into your skin, and my skill at decapitating people is among the best in Japan.”

“None of that is at *all* reassuring!”

Suddenly, Ryoma began to chuckle. After laughing for some time, he turned his eyes contemptuously to Yurika. “Actually, I’m done with you. I thought a Hero love interest might be interesting, but you’re a total idiot. Nothing moe about you at all.”

Ryoma turned his left hand to Yurika. The light that encompassed his body began to concentrate in his left hand, then he fired off a shot of light.

“Get out of the way!”



Yuichi knocked Natsuki over.

They both fell to the side, and the shot of light passed through where Natsuki had been. The shot toppled over the tables behind them and kept on going, not stopping even after it blew a hole in the wall.

“The blade! The blade’s digging in! I’m bleeding! I’m telling you, I’m bleeding!” Yurika screamed.

“Isn’t it amazing that I didn’t cut your head clean off?” Natsuki commented.

“That’s not something to brag about!”

It had happened so suddenly, Yuichi hadn’t even thought about the blade, but he was relieved that Yurika was safe.

It seemed that Ryoma needed to focus those light blasts before he could fire them. He hadn’t fired a followup shot, but the light around his body was growing more intense. It wouldn’t be long before he acted again.

As Yuichi began thinking about how best to deal with him, he heard Ende speak up excitedly from close by.

“This is what he is now. He’s totally nuts, but he’s still a protagonist. Anything he does will be run through a righteousness filter, fudging the details of what actually happened.”

“You mean that voice from before?” Yuichi asked.

“Yeah. He can use his event cards to determine what happens next. Of course, it can’t completely twist a person’s free will, but it’s possible that if you lose to him here, what it said will become true. His power can even overwrite things that have already happened. In other words, you’ll be retroactively turned into the killer.”

“Dammit! Was this really what you wanted?!” Yuichi shouted.

“I just wanted to give Ryoma more power. I never thought things would come to this,” Ende said theatrically, throwing up her hands.

“If you’re going to enact a crazy scheme, at least think it through a little more!”

But as Ende had said, he couldn’t leave Ryoma at large. He wasn’t sure if beating the man would really cause him to lose his protagonist abilities, but for now, punching was pretty much Yuichi’s only option.

In other words, it was his usual way of thinking.

* * * * *

Now, use your power! Take your revenge! the voice resounded in his head.

He’d begun to hear the voice when he’d been wrapped in the hair, driven to the brink of despair.

Ryoma wasn’t good at fighting.

He’d solved a variety of problems in the past, but he hadn’t done it using his own power. By himself, he was a fairly useless human being. He was well aware that he couldn’t do much of anything without someone else’s help.

But the person who had killed his sisters and his childhood friend was right in front of him.

That person was going to kill him if he didn’t do something.

It couldn’t be allowed.

Not having power was no excuse.

If he was killed here and now, it would all be for nothing.

Ryoma struggled. He struggled and struggled, but his body wouldn't move. And just when he was about to give up and admit that he couldn't beat this woman...

Do you want power? the voice asked him.

It was the voice of the devil.

He realized that to respond to it would be to do something he couldn't take back. But he felt no hesitation.

Give me power! Ryoma answered immediately.

I shall.

Immediately, power welled up inside him. Like a dam bursting, it came out as a torrent from the depths of his soul.

Anger filled in the void in his heart. The power of violence stained his soul black. But he didn't mind. It was a small price to pay for vengeance.

Nothing else mattered now. He just needed to beat them.

The next thing he knew, the hair that was binding him had blown apart, vanquished by Ryoma's overflowing power.

He focused that power into his right arm. Crushing it had been extremely simple. He could see everything clearly now.

Kotori's body crumbled away, leaving only a single rib behind.

A Divine Vessel.

He didn't know when Kotori had acquired it.

She'd always been the sort of person to invite trouble, he thought, and the memory brought another wave of anger surging inside of him. Still, while it might be a part of a god, it was the only memento he had of Kotori.

Unsteady on his feet, Ryoma began walking towards Kotori. It was then that he saw it.

"Thanks. I really wanted this. Saved me a lot of time." Yuichi Sakaki stepped on Kotori's remains to pick up the rib.

That was right.

He was still here.

They were still here.

Yuichi Sakaki, Natsuki Takeuchi, and Yurika Maruyama were here.

"Don't lump me in with that Alberta freak, okay?" Yuichi Sakaki said with a cruel chuckle.

Kill, kill, kill! something inside of Ryoma was shouting. Was it the thing that had given him power, or his own voice? He couldn't be sure. But part of Ryoma was remaining excessively calm.

Yuichi Sakaki was merely a human. He wasn't a yokai like Alberta, or a person with RPG hero powers like Yurika Maruyama, or an awakened existence like Ryoma.

He could feel a clear difference between them. This man was nothing to fear.

Still, that didn't mean he could just let him go.

He wouldn't play with him. He'd just kill him quickly. He turned his right hand towards Yuichi and fired a shot of light that had relatively little power behind it.

It was just meant as a diversion, but Yuichi Sakaki wouldn't know how much power it had. He'd have to dodge it, no matter what.

After firing off the blast, Ryoma moved with all his might. He used the aura around him as a propellant, then ran in an arc to get around behind Yuichi.

A simultaneous attack from the front and behind.

He reared his left arm back, focusing power in it. Once it contained enough power to punch a person into powder on impact, he thrust his fist as hard as he could at the back of Yuichi's head.

He heard a dull thud.

He was confused.

He was looking at unfamiliar scenery, his body was racked by pain, and his memories were fuzzy.

The sound had come from right above his head, and just before he blacked out, he realized the world around him was upside-down.

* * * * *

Yuichi ducked, dodging the bolt of light in front of him and the strike at his back simultaneously. He then crouched down and took a step, grabbed Ryoma's right arm, and used a zhen jiao while at the same time thrusting his left elbow into his back. If Mutsuko were watching, she would have gleefully explained it as a combination of liu zhou tou and laohu dou mao from Bajiquan.

Yuichi's elbow struck Ryoma's solar plexus in a counter. It was the kind of strike that would kill an ordinary human, but Yuichi

knew Ryoma was far from ordinary.

He squeezed the other man's left arm with his right hand, and then thrust the left arm he'd used in the elbow strike under his crotch. At the same time, he dropped his hips even lower and extended his left leg between Ryoma's legs. From that position, he bore the man on his shoulders and tossed him.

Crushing Ryoma's balls with his left hand, he drove the man's head into the floor. Then for extra insurance, he kicked him in the head with a low snap kick. Ryoma was sent flying.

Tipping over cafe tables, he only stopped when he hit the wall. The aura around his body extinguished.

"Sakaki... I'm a serial killer, and that gave even me pause," Natsuki criticized. "Did you really have to go that far?"

"You said people can't just go around talking about killing people, but I'm pretty sure you were seriously trying to kill him there..." Yurika added.

"He's not dead. I held back," Yuichi said with the air of an excuse.

"How strange," Natsuki said. "Does 'holding back' have a different meaning from the one I'm familiar with?"

"My initial elbow strike didn't have a lot of penetration," Yuichi said. "I think that aura thing had some sort of property that absorbs attacks, so I figured this wouldn't be enough to kill him."

Of course Yuichi wouldn't go this far against a normal opponent. He'd only done it after determining that it would take a considerably powerful attack to get real results.

Yuichi approached Ryoma, who was slumped against the wall.

He was alive. But his face was pale, his breathing was quick, and his heart rate seemed to be up.

“Is he in shock?” Natsuki asked. “He might die if we just leave him there. Not that I would mind.”

“That’s when it’s handy to know a super doctor!” Yuichi said.

He was referring to Kazuya Noro, Aiko’s father. Apparently, he was known as a super doctor, so as long as Ryoma wasn’t dead, he could probably save him.

“That’s... strange,” Ryoma murmured. “It wasn’t supposed to go that way... you were supposed to die as part of a demonstration of the power I awakened as a result of the death of someone close to me. I’m the protagonist... how could this happen?”

Saying that much must have been considerably painful for Ryoma, and Yuichi couldn’t understand why he’d bothered. He really must have found it all utterly inconceivable.

“Whoever said a protagonist can’t lose?” Yuichi snapped. “There are plenty of bad-end stories out there.”

Yuichi wasn’t sure whether Ryoma had accepted that explanation or not, but either way, the man fell unconscious directly afterwards.

Yuichi looked over at Ende, who was sitting in a seat some distance away. He thought she would be frustrated, but she seemed as fascinated by the proceedings as ever. She even applauded Yuichi.

“Wow, I guess a protagonist won’t work either. I had a feeling that might be the case, of course... but overturning something like that really took a lot of power.”

“Can I be done with the war now?” Yuichi asked. “You’re satisfied, right? I can just walk away?”

“Hmm, if that’s what you *want*, I don’t mind...”

It was a line pregnant with meaning. Still, Ende didn’t seem like she was going to try anything else right now, so Yuichi decided to focus on the aftermath.

With Ryoma having been soundly beaten, the Divine Vessel had been ejected from his body. Yuichi looked down at the ground and saw an eye-sized glass ball had fallen next to him.

He was about to reach for the Evil God’s eye when, suddenly, it was snatched away.

He turned to see a small machine with four propellers — a drone — flying quickly off with the eye.

“Huh?” Yuichi watched the drone go.

It was heading for the broken window, where he saw two people standing on the window frame.

“What are you doing here, Sis?” he asked.

Mutsuko Sakaki stood there boldly, arms crossed.

Yuichi felt relieved.

It was easy to guess what she was doing here. She had a tendency to show up at the strangest times, and he assumed she was probably just swiping the item out from under his nose for some stupid reason, like that she’d thought it sounded like fun.

Any reservations he might have were overshadowed by his relief at seeing his missing sister again.

Perhaps that was why it took him a little time to realize what was off about the situation.

He hadn’t noticed the boy standing next to her at first, but as

the drone approached him, it extended its manipulators and handed him the eye.

Yuichi was dumbstruck.

“What’s going on here?” he burst out.

The person standing next to Mutsuko was Hiromichi Rokuhara, the boy who had stolen Soul Reader from him.

Chapter 5: Mutsuko Sakaki the Traitor?!

Hiromichi Rokuhara had always seemed like a sullen young man. That hadn't changed, but there was something clearly different about him now: he had wings.

Black wings, like those of a crow, had sprouted from his back, giving him a demonic appearance.

He was standing on the empty window frame. Across from him, protagonist Ryoma Takei sat slumped against the wall, with Yuichi and Natsuki standing next to him.

Yurika was near the entrance, to the left of Hiromichi from Yuichi's point of view.

Ende was sitting in a seat in the back of the cafe, surveying the room before her, and Mutsuko Sakaki was standing in the window frame next to Hiromichi.

“Hey, I don't think your ward is having much effect. People have been coming in the whole time...” Yuichi muttered. It was a trivial complaint, but perhaps he needed to get his mind off of the sight before his eyes.

“Well, the ward that I cast isn't a spell type of thing,” Ende said. “It's more like a use of public authority, which means that it won't stop your typical rule-breaker types from getting in.”

Yuichi had to admit that Mutsuko was unlikely to heed a police cordon. She'd already done more than a few arguably illegal things in the past.

“But a ward was never going to work on him and Mutsuko

anyway... after all, I invited them here.”

Ende slowly began walking towards the two as she spoke. Then she turned in front of Mutsuko and Hiromichi and spread her arms wide.

“This is my next plan. I was trying to think about how to beat Yuichi Sakaki, and the conclusion was simple: get Mutsuko Sakaki on my side, and make them fight. Pretty effective, right?”

“Uh, what?” Yuichi burst out.

Mutsuko was siding with the enemy?

The premise seemed so unreal, it was making his head spin. His sister might say and do ridiculous things, but he’d always believed she would never betray him, at least.

“Knock it off, Sis,” he said. He spoke quickly, flustered. “This is a joke, right? I beat that protagonist guy, so let’s go home... Oh, by the way, I did that one thing, the elbow strike into kata-guruma throw that you thought up? I wish you’d been here earlier. I won’t get many other chances to do it...”

“The question was how to get Mutsuko on my side, but then, conveniently for me, you seemed to have some kind of falling out on your own.” Ende continued, seeming to enjoy her monologue. “I brought up the subject, and she agreed to it readily.”

“Hey! While we’re here, let’s recover that other Divine Vessel! Then we’ll have almost all of them!” Mutsuko pointed straight at Yurika.

“What are you doing, Sis?” Yuichi yelled.

“Huh? Does the person who whined about not wanting to take part in the war have something to say to me?” Mutsuko asked bluntly. “It’s none of your business, so why don’t you amscray?”

Yuichi, panicked, turned his attention to Hiromichi. “Hey! Why are you working with my big sister? You’re in the same class, so you must know how crazy she is!”

“She said she’d help me, so why should I refuse? We’ve made a lot of progress in collecting Divine Vessels together.” Hiromichi didn’t seem to mind at all, and Yuichi had no response to that.

“Ende!” he shouted instead. “I thought Ryoma was your big plan! What the hell is this?”

“You know, most plans need a backup,” Ende said. “If one arrow misses, just fire another. It’s common sense.”

Yuichi then turned his eyes imploringly to Natsuki.

He honestly had no idea what to do anymore.

“It’s fun watching you panic, but shouldn’t you be protecting Maruyama?” Natsuki asked.

“Th-That’s right. We can’t let him get her Divine Vessel!” Yuichi couldn’t pretend like the situation had nothing to do with him now, and he also couldn’t just let Yurika be assaulted.

“You there!” Mutsuko called. “We don’t want a fight, so just hand over the Divine Vessel and I won’t hurt you! Although if you want a fight, we’re raring to go!”

Yuichi thought about pointing out the contradiction there, but Mutsuko was ignoring the Divine Vessel host Hiromichi and apparent puppetmaster Ende to further the story on her own.

“What, you weren’t planning on killing me when I let my guard down?” Yurika readied her sword.

Generally speaking, in the Divine Vessels War, killing your opponent was the right answer.

You could just steal someone's Divine Vessel, but a vessel with a still-living host couldn't take a new one, so you couldn't use its power. Besides, letting someone live meant they could come back after you again.

Apparently annoyed at Mutsuko taking over the conversation, Hiromichi spoke up. "I don't need your pitiful power. I already have everything I need. Now, why don't you hand it over before we change our minds?"

Yurika winced in pain. She seemed to be thinking she didn't stand a chance against Hiromichi.

Yuichi had come to the same conclusion.

The wings on his back... they were probably the Divine Vessel used by the tengu. They enhanced a person's ability to fly through the air.

If the guy attacked Yuichi, there wouldn't really be a problem; he could probably both dodge and strike back. But if he went after Yurika, there wasn't much that Yuichi could do for her, and Yurika probably wouldn't be able to fight back on her own.

"Give me a break! You think a righteous hero like me is gonna lose to villains like you? Take this! Brave Slash!" she snapped.

It was the same move she had used to take Alberta's head off before. Yurika held her sword aloft and then slashed it at Hiromichi.

The invisible slash whistled through the air, but Hiromichi remained unfazed.

"Hey, I told you, that stuff won't wor—"

"That's right! Rokuhara is invincible in a superpowers battle!" Mutsuko interrupted enthusiastically. "He can nullify abilities and also steal them! He's a total cheater!"

Hiromichi seemed to have wanted to say something, but Mutsuko had interfered. Apparently she was a total loose cannon now that she was on the enemy side.

Yuichi picked up a nearby chair and threw it at Hiromichi.

There were three of them, but Hiromichi was probably the only fighter among them, so taking him out was Yuichi's first priority.

Hiromichi had been about to take flight, but the chair hit him first and he collapsed.

As that was going on, Natsuki rushed over to Yurika while Yuichi charged at the three of them.

Hiromichi wasn't an experienced fighter to begin with, and on top of that, he was flustered. Yuichi was beginning to think he would be easy to restrain regardless of his abilities. But things quickly took a turn for the worse.

A fourth figure had appeared at the window.

Yuichi normally wouldn't be so careless — which may have been an indication of just how flustered he was.

Yuichi barely blocked the giant fist that had appeared from behind Mutsuko, but it still sent him flying. The distance between them opened up again.

“Sakaki...” Natsuki moaned.

Yuichi quickly looked in her direction. “Takeuchi!”

Both Natsuki and Yurika were on the ground.

A drone hovered in the air above. The original one was still hovering near Mutsuko's side, suggesting she must have prepared multiple ones.

The fact that they'd both been knocked out so easily suggested the drone had used a taser, or perhaps knock-out gas.

"You really ought to pay attention!" Mutsuko called.

As if in time with Mutsuko's voice, the bearer of the fist from before climbed in through the window.

It was the wooden man, a practice tool that Mutsuko had developed. It was a simple humanoid form made up of logs, but it was extremely powerful — powerful enough to have taken out the oni Ibaraki when he'd tried to peep on the girls in the bath.

"Damn!" Yuichi knew from experience just how much of a threat it was.

The wooden man slid closer to him. Yuichi knew that there were wheels behind its legs, and it basically moved by skating.

It swung its arm wide, striking indiscriminately as it came for him.

This was really bad. Unlike a human, the wooden man barely telegraphed its movements at all. Its joint construction and range of movement also differed from those of a human; in other words, it was extremely unpredictable.

Yuichi used his natural perception and reflexes to dodge the attacks, but it still had him on the defensive.

"Hmm, just as I thought," said Ende. "When Mutsuko's on our side, Yuichi's movements lose their brilliance... Well, bye. We got the right arm and the rib, so we'll be going now. I guess next time we meet will be the final battle? The Evil God's resurrection will take place in his sacred territory. You can ignore it if you want, but if you do, Hiromichi Rokuhara might get a pretty evil wish granted."

"Hey, you! Wait!" Yuichi shouted.

While dodging the wooden man's attacks, Yuichi watched Ende and the others go. They were walking leisurely away with the right arm and the rib in their possession.

Attempting to hurry, Yuichi just hit the wooden man with everything he had. If it was just a machine, that should be enough to break it.

But the wooden man was a training tool; it had to be sturdy, and it used a mysterious balance algorithm that Mutsuko had cooked up to restore its balance instantly.

The wooden man had always been ridiculously strong, prompting Yuichi to think that rather than using it for training, they would be better served sending it to fight in his place.

“And I still hate its stupid face!” he shouted.

The wooden man's face was a truly half-assed portrayal, just three round holes for eyes and a mouth.



Yuichi suddenly remembered how the wooden man worked. “Wait, am I stupid?”

It was powered by electricity, which meant it wouldn’t be able to move this forcefully without a strong power source. That meant it needed external power, and indeed there was a cable to provide it trailing out from its back.

But it was proving hard to get around behind the wooden man. Mutsuko must have known that he would go after the cable, because the wooden man moved lithely, blocking Yuichi’s every attempt.

She must have programmed it to anticipate Yuichi’s behavior, as its movements seemed precisely calculated to counter his.

While he struggled to get behind it, he heard Natsuki’s voice. “Do you want me to cut this?”

“Yeah! Do it!” Yuichi shouted reflexively.

Natsuki had woken up and was still staggering, but she got around behind the wooden man. The cord was made very sturdily to prevent cutting, but Natsuki easily sliced through it with her scalpel.

“Umbilical cable cut,” the wooden man said abruptly. “Switching to internal power. Self-destruct sequence engaged.”

“Self-destruct?!” Yuichi yelled.

Perhaps because it was on internal power now, the wooden man’s movements had slowed greatly.

Yuichi took Natsuki’s hand and began to run away at full speed. He swooped up Yurika and ran out of the cafe. They kept running until they found themselves in the back alleys they’d been in before.

Some time later, he heard what sounded like an explosion.

Yuichi realized he'd left Ryoma back there, but he found he couldn't care anymore, sinking to the ground in both physical and mental exhaustion.

By now, it was completely dark. Luckily, they were in a back alley between buildings with light streaming out from the windows, so they could still see.

"Are you okay?" Natsuki asked Yuichi, who hadn't moved since collapsing.

He wasn't okay at all, but he knew he couldn't just stay down forever.

Yuichi looked up. "To be honest, I'm not."

His sister had always been reckless, but he'd never thought she would join the enemy.

"Was she brainwashed?" Natsuki asked.

"My sister? She'd be the one *doing* the brainwashing. So it was probably her idea to join them. I just never thought she'd go this far because I didn't want to get Soul Reader back."

"I see," Natsuki said. "I don't know much about your circumstances, Sakaki, but is it possible she's not *really* turning against you?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Maruyama and I are still alive," she said. "You can't use the Divine Vessels if their hosts are still alive, can you? He said something about not needing her pitiful power, but wouldn't it make things easier for him later if he just killed us?"

Natsuki was right. There was no reason for them to let them

live. If Mutsuko had wanted to kill them, she could have just detonated the wooden man.

“I guess it could be a kind of training?” Yuichi hedged.

Becoming Yuichi’s enemy to help train him did sound like the sort of thing his sister would do. He was starting to think it was possible. She’d never turned against him before, but she had nearly killed him several times, so maybe this wasn’t really all that out of the ordinary.

“Okay. Let’s get going.” Yuichi stood up.

Natsuki looked dumbfounded.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“You bounced back so quickly, it shocked me.”

“I can’t exactly stay depressed forever.”

“I thought you’d beat yourself up until it was time for your big comeback,” said Natsuki. “So, what’s your plan?”

“There’s somewhere I need to go. Takeuchi, can you take Maruyama home?”

“Certainly, but will you be all right by yourself?”

“I think so.”

“I see.” Natsuki said nothing more and headed back to Yurika.

Yuichi continued down the back alleys, towards the entrance to the sewers they’d used the other day.

At the end of an alley was a manhole. Normally a person would need special tools, but Yuichi slid his fingers into the hole grips and lifted it easily.

Yuichi was just about to climb down when he heard a voice from behind him. “Do you have business with me?”

He turned to find a flashily dressed man with a kind disposition. It was the person who had arranged the Divine Vessels War, the avatar of the evil god Nergal.

“If you’re going down there to hunt monsters, I won’t stop you, of course...” the man said.

“I guess I do have business with you,” Yuichi said. “Your sacred territory is down here, right?”

Ende had said the Evil God’s revival would happen in his sacred territory, so Yuichi had decided he’d just go and clean things up there first.

“Wrong.”

“Wrong?! But I saw the altar down there!”

One level down from the sewers was a labyrinth of passageways, and further in was a dome-like space. There was an altar there, which Nergal had treated like his own, so Yuichi was convinced it must be his sacred territory.

“The altar is there for humans to revere their god,” Nergal said. “It’s a human realm, not the same as a sacred territory.”

“Then where is it?”

“Oh, come now. You think I’m going to tell you where my sealed body is?” Nergal asked, dumbstruck.

“Look, I don’t know anything about your sacred territory, and this is the first I’ve heard about you being sealed there,” Yuichi said impatiently.

“What are you intending to do, then?”

“Well, I was told we’d fight the final battle there.”

“I see. But the body of the Evil God will only revive in the sacred territory after all the Divine Vessels have been collected. In other words, after the war has ended.”

Which meant that even if Yuichi went there now, no one would be there.

“Fine, but where is the sacred territory?” he asked.

“I don’t see why I should tell you that.”

“That reminds me,” Yuichi said. “One of your subordinates attacked Takeuchi. You really need to get your people under control. Or are you the type who washes his hands of what his servants do?”

“Hmm. I try to give my servants a long leash, and I value their autonomy... but I won’t try to talk my way out of responsibility. Fine. The sacred territory is at your school. Is that good enough?”

“The school? Really?”

“Well, you should try to find the rest out yourself,” said Nergal. “I feel like I’ve done you a pretty big favor already.”

“I guess it was a little out of line to ask a sealed guy where he was sealed.”

“As a bonus, I’ll tell you that Hiromichi now has all of the Divine Vessels except one, and more than enough energy to revive me. So it’s more or less already finished, in more ways than one.”

If the war ended, the Evil God would revive and the world would end. It didn’t feel real, but Yuichi couldn’t afford to take it lightly.

“I know I asked, but should you really be telling me all this?”

he asked.

“Well, to be honest, the main body and I aren’t connected that directly. I act on my own prerogative. And from a personal perspective, I like you quite a lot.”

“Even though letting me go could end up halting your resurrection?” Yuichi asked.

“If it happens, it happens. There’s always next time. Our lifespans are longer than humans’, so we’re quite patient.”

“Fine.” Yuichi had determined that he wasn’t lying.

I wonder what Sis and the others will do...

Yuichi was just thinking about what to do next when his phone suddenly rang. The number was unfamiliar, but he answered it anyway.

“Sage Mutsuko has gone mad!”

It was the voice of Chiharu Dannoura.

“...I don’t recall giving you my phone number.”

“It cost me a pretty penny,” Chiharu said. “The swine... they knew that I was desperate!”

“You bought it?!” Yuichi shouted. “Who’s putting my phone number up on the market? Who did you buy it from?”

“I may not tell! If you wish to know, you must prostrate before me and lick my boots!”

“Why are you giving *me* commands?”

“On second thought, having you lick my boots would be quite disgusting... perhaps you should not do it after all.”

“I wasn’t planning on it! So what do you want, anyway?”

“Ah! Sage Mutsuko came after me and demanded that I hand over my Divine Vessel! She wished me to hand over my Apocalypse Eyes! My Apocalypse Eyes, I tell you!”

“Huh? ...Oh, no! I forgot you had a Divine Vessel!” It had taken Yuichi a few moments to remember, the result of his trying to forget everything about the Divine Vessels War before.

“How can you say that?!” Chiharu yelled. “Have you forgotten our passionate first meeting?”

“Oh... uh, I’ve actually been trying hard not to think about you. So I’m sorry... I knew my sister was collecting Divine Vessels, and it didn’t even occur to me to tell you.”

“But how?! How could you forget your beloved?!”

Yuichi felt genuinely sorry. If Hiromichi was close to amassing all of the Divine Vessels, he probably should have let Chiharu know. If hers hadn’t been stolen yet, he could have warned her. He’d also forgotten that Chiharu was the only person he knew that could detect other Divine Vessels through resonance.

“So, what did you want?” Yuichi asked.

“Um... help, please?”

“What’s with the normal speech all of a sudden? And doesn’t calling her ‘Sage’ indicate respect? Why don’t you just do what she says?”

“The fact that she has sent a Crowman-like figure to attack me makes me a bit suspicious of her motivations!”

“Crowman? Who the... oh, Rokuhara, I guess... Where are you now?”

“The zoo.”

“Why were you going to a zoo alone at this hour?”

“Why do you assume I am alone?” Chiharu demanded. “You know that I have countless animals in my service! I am an animal lover, and thus I regularly check the zoo at night to see how they are doing!”

“So you’re on the run all by yourself, right? I’m impressed you can escape Rokuhara, though...”

The wings the guy had gained from the Divine Vessel should grant him very swift flight. It would be hard for most normal people to give him the slip.

“Yes,” Chiharu said. “I used a Dannoura-style Smoke Curtain Art to blind him, then used a Dannoura-style All-Direction Strike to send arrows flying in all directions, then used Dannoura-style Pickup Line Escaping to run away! They all appeared effective, so I believe I have held him off!”

“Um, what about the other people at the zoo?”

“Are you familiar with the legal term ‘emergency evacuation’?”

“You’d better start thinking of ‘official apology’ and ‘out-of-court settlement.’”

“’Twas a joke! The reason I came here is because this zoo’s popularity had been abruptly declining! I am likely the only one here at the moment!”

“This is no time to be joking. The zoo is in the next town over, right? I don’t think I’ll be able to make it in time... Okay. Just give up. Hand over the Divine Vessel and they’ll leave you alone.”

Chiharu’s Divine Vessel might be the last one, but there was nothing he could do about that.

“What?! You expect me to simply hand over my Apocalypse Eyes?” she screamed.

“If you don’t want to, that’s up to you,” Yuichi said. “You’re free to fight them to the end if you want.”

“But how am I to give my Divine Vessel away? It is an ability I came upon without realizing it. I do not know how to expunge it!”

“Given past experience, the vessel will be expelled if you’re unconscious. Can you knock yourself unconscious?”

“Yuichi Sakaki! How could you ask a young maiden such as I to render herself helpless before an enemy? Do you actively seek cuckoldry?!”

“I actually have no investment in that whatsoever, but... Hey. Can a person take out their Divine Vessel of their own free will?” Yuichi asked Nergal, assuming he would know best how the Divine Vessels worked.

“You can,” said Nergal. “Just wish for it. But even in that case, it still can’t be taken by a new host as long as the original host remains alive.”

“He says you just need to wish for it to leave you.”

“Indeed? HRRRRRAGH!”

“Shut up! Don’t shout into the phone!”

“It is out! It truly is out! It dropped from my eye in a startling moment!”

“Give that to them, then.” Yuichi hung up.

He was pretty sure that they wouldn’t kill her if she handed over the vessel. Chiharu’s power was the ability to see numbers over a person’s head. The numbers seemed to indicate something,

but the ability still wasn't especially useful, so he doubted they would go out of their way to get it.

"Incidentally, Hiromichi will now have all of them," Nergal said.

It seemed Chiharu's Divine Vessel was the last one.

"Okay, that figures," Yuichi said. "But the Evil God won't revive immediately, right?"

"Correct. There's still a ritual to be held in the sacred territory, which means there's still time for you to act."

"You make it sound like you don't want him revived."

"That's not true. The resurrection of my true form is my highest priority. I just don't see any need to rush it; I prefer to take it easy."

Yuichi thought that Mutsuko wouldn't be in any great hurry, either. It was just a gut feeling, but he couldn't imagine she would try to do it sneakily in the middle of the night.

He decided he'd wait until tomorrow to investigate the school.

Chapter 6: For Some Reason, It's the School Invasion Cliché

It was the morning of the next day, Tuesday.

Mutsuko wasn't at the Sakaki breakfast table once again, though that was more or less as expected.

It would probably be awkward for her to come back, considering the circumstances...

Yuichi headed for school and met up with Aiko on the way. They arrived at the classroom together as usual.

They got through morning classes without anything unusual happening. Then during lunch break, Yuichi headed for the roof.

There were a few other people there eating lunch. Yuichi headed to one corner where two young women stood waiting for him. One was Furu Shinomiya.

“Yuichi Sakaki! How could you leave your harem master in such peril? And hanging up without warning? Such impudence is unacceptable in a retainer!” The other one was Chiharu Dannoura.

This slender girl, who carried a large instrument case, was the heir to Dannoura Style Archery. She had been quite overweight before, but she had lost it all abruptly and seemed to be keeping it off.

“So, how'd things go after that?” Yuichi asked.

“Ah. I threw the eyeball at them in desperation, and they left. I proceeded to enjoy the rest of my night zoo tour, and then I went home.”

“You should have gone right home... you never know what might happen,” Yuichi said. Chiharu’s confidence made Yuichi think he shouldn’t have worried about her from the start. “Anyway, that means all the Divine Vessels are in the hands of this guy named Rokuhara.”

Yuichi went on to tell Furu everything that had happened yesterday.

“I see,” Furu said. “I’ve already sent word about the Evil God, and they said they’d dispatch their strongest forces, so I think it should work out. I doubt there’s anything else for us to do.”

Furu sounded extremely blasé about it. She must have had absolute faith in these “strongest forces.”

“Any hints about the ‘sacred territory’?” Yuichi said. “He said it was at the school...”

If there were specialists, he should leave it to them; there was a good chance that an amateur like Yuichi getting involved would probably just make things worse. Still, he had his doubts that this would end without his involvement as long as Mutsuko was working with Ende to defeat him.

“Sacred territory, huh?” Furu mused. “I don’t know its location exactly, but there probably is one here... Remember the specter invasion before? They had to be coming from somewhere nearby, which means there’s probably a passage to another dimension somewhere in this school.”

“Oh, so that’s it...” Yuichi had had an inkling that might be it since he’d first heard talk about the so-called sacred territory.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, but you should leave the rest to us,” Furu said, then left.

Yuichi approached the fence. Chiharu accompanied him, even though he had no further business with her.

Yuichi had previously jumped from here to enter that classroom from the outside. Inside, for some reason, it was like another world, with a classroom made of wood, and burn marks everywhere. You couldn’t get there through normal means. You had to fall and go in through the window.

The classroom within had been full of specters. He had defeated a lot of them, but probably not all of them. When it came right down to it, he wasn’t sure if he could fight specters without Soul Reader.

“Heya, Yuichi!” a cheery voice addressed him from behind.

He turned around to see a translucent image of a girl waving to him cheerfully.

“Why can I see you?” Yuichi asked.

It was the specter Chie Amatsu. She had led the specter invasion of Seishin High, and even after it’d been resolved, she had apparently failed to move on, so now she just hung around the school.

Yuichi had assumed Soul Reader was the reason he could see the ghosts, but it seemed it was unrelated.

“I’m starting to think that losing Soul Reader hasn’t changed anything at all...” Yuichi muttered, beginning to feel extremely depressed about his future.

“Indeed, I can see her, too,” Chiharu declared. “But of course I can! I am who I am!”

If Chiharu could see her too, then it seemed that once you could see them, you couldn't stop.

"What's the matter?" Yuichi asked.

"Nothing. Hey, Amatsu, you lived in the world below for a while, right? What were things like in there? I only got to see what was inside the classroom."

"I couldn't go in very far in, either... It felt pretty dangerous."

"I see," Yuichi said. "I'd like to have a look, but I probably shouldn't go right this instant."

He did want to investigate a little bit, but he couldn't just go jumping off a building in broad daylight.

"Want me to check it out instead?" Chie asked.

"Sure. It would at least be helpful to know if someone else was there."

Chie climbed up the fence and fell down. After a while, she returned, walking up from the staircase to the roof.

"I guess you can't fly, huh?" Yuichi asked.

"It looked pretty much the same as usual. I think there would at least be footprints if someone had gone in."

Yuichi remembered the floor, which had been piled high with dust. Fresh footprints would have been immediately obvious.

Still, it was a strange world with bizarre rules about how you could get into it. There might yet be another entrance somewhere.

"Should I wait until after class?" he wondered.

Perhaps he should go now, regardless. But to do that would probably destroy Yuichi's daily life. Skipping class to save the world was crazy, in Yuichi's opinion.

"You leave me no choice," Chiharu declared. "I shall accompany you!"

"I'd like to say 'don't bother,' but you do tend to be pretty useful..." Yuichi muttered. Chiharu could be annoying in a lot of ways, but she was also pretty capable.

"Indeed I do, indeed I do!"

Still, the way she pushed her luck every time was extremely tiresome.

Yuichi decided to go back to the classroom.

As afternoon classes went by, thoughts drifted through Yuichi's mind over what to do next.

All the Divine Vessels were in one place now, which meant the Evil God's revival was probably imminent. They would probably act either today or tomorrow.

The revival of an evil god seemed like a pretty bad thing, and it certainly had to be stopped. But he didn't know what the monster hunter specialists had planned, so his best course of action for now was to watch and act based on how things unfolded. At any rate, he wanted to find out what was going on in the sacred territory.

Just as he was thinking that, there was a commotion among the students sitting by the window.

"Hey! You guys need to settle down! Did you forget you're in high school?" Hanako Nodayama, who was holding class at the moment, yelled at them.

“Teacher! We know, but something weird’s going on! Look!”

“Huh? It’s just a dog running around on school grounds! I’ll beat you black, and — oh, that is unexpected...”

Hanako approached with the air of one taking up a challenge, but returned to her lectern looking surprised.

“Hey, is one of you guys making your middle school day-dreams reality or something?”

“Teacher, the rest of us have no clue what’s going on,” Shota, the student sitting in front of Yuichi, asked. “Could you fill us in?”

“Okay! It’d be a pain in the ass to try to explain, so anyone who wants to look out the window, just go ahead and do it. I give permission!”

The students all crowded to the window.

Yuichi joined them, looking outside.

From here, the athletic fields were visible. There were tanks rolling in, coming in from the athletic field-side entrance. The students and teachers who’d been having gym class on the field were scattering in their wake.

“Huh? What’s going on here?” a student shouted.

“Are they filming a movie?” another cried.

“Wouldn’t they have told us in advance?”

“You don’t think... terrorists?”

“No, no way. Why would they come after our school? It makes no sense!”

The students all seemed at a loss as to what was going on or

what to do.

People got out of the tanks. They were men dressed in black kimonos with shaved heads. In other words, monks. As they watched, a number of the monks moved to block off the entrance.

The classroom was filled with confusion. Suddenly, the door banged open, and everyone went silent. A monk entered. He was carrying a clipboard.

The monks on the ground wouldn't have been able to get here that fast, so he must have come from somewhere else.

“Okay, everyone! Please return to your seats and raise your hands! Let's have full cooperation, here!” Hanako barked. It seemed like she was acting out of self-preservation, but in this case, that was probably the right move. There would be no telling what might happen if they broke out in a panic.

The students must have trusted Hanako more or less, as they did as they were told and held up their hands. Yuichi did the same.

“Ah, good to see you all so understanding.” The monk smiled as he walked up to the lectern.

Hanako quickly left the lectern to him and moved to a corner of the classroom.

“As you may know from looking outside, we are attempting to seal off this school. Ah, you're probably tired from holding up your hands. Feel free to lower them.”

The students did as they were told.

The monk produced an ID from his front pocket and showed it to them. He was probably trying to authenticate his position, but the people in the class had no way of knowing if it was real.

“We’re officers of the peace. That means we work with the police. We deal with very specialized subjects, and we’ve been authorized to come here and deal with a situation in progress by any means necessary.”

He seemed to be trying to be reassure them, but Yuichi wasn’t buying it. He couldn’t be sure he really was with the law. He just looked like a monk in a black kimono with a shaved head.

“A terribly violent armed serial killer is inside the school right now, so we need you to stay in your classroom. As long as you stay in here, you should be safe.”

What’s going on? Is Sis behind this, too? Yuichi thought. At the moment, he had no way of knowing if they were connected. But he had an uneasy feeling about this.

Only one of the monks had come in, but he could sense a number of them out in the hall. He didn’t know why, but it did seem like they were trying to seal the students in their rooms.

Yuichi studied the monk.

He seemed like he knew martial arts, and judging from his center of balance, he was probably hiding a weapon in his kimono’s breast pocket. He was smiling placidly, but it seemed to be no more than a mask; he radiated irritation, as if he’d been tasked with a job he felt was beneath him.

It would be hard to neutralize him from where I am. Though from Takeuchi’s seat, maybe...

Yuichi’s seat was near the back, while Natsuki’s was in the front row. She could probably take him out, but she probably would want to avoid making trouble in front of their classmates.

Well, I don’t want to come off like a freak, either...

Still, Yuichi couldn't sit back and watch his classmates get hurt, if it came to that.

But even if I beat him, someone else might come in...

Just beating them all might not be that difficult, but the difficulty level would spike with the added factor of having to protect his classmates.

"Excuse me! What about bathroom breaks?" a girl in the first row asked. Yuichi hadn't talked to her often, but she was a girl named Risa Ayanokoji who appeared to be from a rather wealthy family.

"I'm not taking questions, but I'll make an exception for this one," the monk said. "As I said before, our only request is that you do not leave this room."

"Huh? But then..."

It seemed they weren't even going to let them go to the bathroom. Apparently feeling like this answered the question, the monk checked the clipboard he was holding.

"Also: this is not a request, but a notification. Yuri Konishi, you are to leave this instant. Your family is waiting for you."

"Excuse me? What does that mean?" Yuri seemed surprised to hear her name called.

"I told you to go home right now." He didn't seem to want to explain any more than that, but of course, no one was going to accept this without question.

"This is ridiculous! Why is it we can't go to the bathroom, but Konishi can go home?" Ayanokoji complained.

The rest of the students burst out in similar complaints.

“Yeah! This is ridiculous!”

“An officer of the peace is like a cop, right? Just catch the criminal already!”

“And if you can’t catch them, just send us home with bodyguards!”

Just then, the monk’s attitude did a complete 180. “Shut the hell up, you brats! I told you to stay here! You can piss your pants if you need to!”

The monk reached for his breast pocket.

Yuichi sprung into action.

Fortunately, since they were in class, he had a number of objects in his desk that could be used as weapons. He threw the tactical pen he’d been using as a writing tool.

Just as the monk was pulling out a pistol, the pen struck him in the elbow. It was heavier and sturdier than a normal pen, and thrown with strength like Yuichi’s, there was no way it wouldn’t be debilitating.

The monk’s face contorted in pain and he was forced to drop the gun.

Then another of the boys took action.

He hit the monk against the blackboard, ran up to him, and thrust a fist into his solar plexus. The monk let out a short groan, then collapsed.

“Nice one, Kogan!” the boy’s friend called. “Is that Kogan Style?”

“Yeah, right. It’s called Yanagisawa Style.”

The boy who had defeated the monk was named Kogan Yanagisawa, and the praise had come from a friend of his.

Is that cun jin? Maybe more like an old-fashioned atemi...

Kogan cast a glance at Yuichi. Even though Yuichi had been holding back, he may have noticed what he'd done.

"Well, we beat him, but what do we do now? The others outside will probably notice soon," Natsuki pointed out cool-headedly.

"I'm not sure what to do in a situation like this..." Hanako murmured, seemingly trying to escape responsibility.

"Leave it to me, okay?" The speaker was An Katagiri, who rose. She was the girl who had had the label "Witch" when he'd first looked at her with Soul Reader. "Sakaki, could you join me for a moment?"

"Why me?" Yuichi approached the lectern as he was called.

"His robe is likely a magic ward," An muttered to him. "It'll be hard to cast spells while he's wearing it, so could you take it off for me?"

She had apparently chosen Yuichi thinking he'd be the type to follow orders.

"Fine. But why can't you touch magic wards?" He was reminded of how Aiko was weak against Buddhist sutras.

He removed the monk's kimono, stripping him down to his underwear. An crouched next to him and grabbed the monk's head in both hands. Suddenly, the monk's eyes snapped open, and he began murmuring something.

Wow, she really is scary!

“That should do it,” she said.

“How are we gonna explain this to the others in the class?”

“Just tell them I persuaded him to assist us.”

“I doubt that’ll work.”

The monk put his robe back on, stood, and wandered out of the classroom, swaying on his feet. There was no sound of commotion outside, so it seemed it must have worked.

“Wow! Katagiri cast a spell on him or something!” Shota shouted. The other classmates seemed to find this plausible, so that was one problem solved.

But we probably still can’t leave the classroom... The others are still on watch outside. They’d solved the immediate problem, but the fundamental issue hadn’t changed.

Yuichi approached Yuri. “You were told to go home earlier. Any idea what that was about?”

“No, none at all. But if they are officers of the peace, it was probably out of consideration for my family situation.”

“Hmm, but in that case, wouldn’t you be okay if you followed the order not to leave the classroom?”

They couldn’t necessarily trust the monk even if he was a real officer of the peace, but it seemed like their main priority was not having any students wandering the halls.

“Hey,” Yuichi murmured to her. “Could you get people to wait here for just an hour or so? You could say there may really be a killer on the loose, so it’s best if nobody leaves, or something.”

The class trusted Yuri a great deal, so Yuichi thought she could probably keep them under control, at least for a while.

“Certainly, but what will you do?”

“I’m going to investigate.”

Yuri stood up at the lectern and began to speak.

With all attention on her for now, Yuichi moved unobtrusively to the back of the classroom and glanced out the window to check the situation outside. There was a line of tanks on the athletic field, but not many people.

Aiko walked up to him and began pressing him for information. “Sakaki! What’s going on? Did you do this?”

“Why would you assume I’m the one behind it?” Yuichi scratched his head idly.

“So it has nothing to do with you?”

“It might, actually, which is why I’m gonna go check.” Yuichi pulled out his smartphone to try to call Furu Shinomiya. They’d been visited by a monk with a magic-warding kimono, so Yuichi suspected he might be connected to the monster hunters.

But his smartphone had no signal.

“Must be jamming them or something...”

“Ah, you’re right.” Aiko checked her own phone.

“Nothing to be done about it. I’m gonna head out for a bit.” Yuichi returned briefly to his seat and scavenged his bag for whatever might be useful.

“Where are you going?” Aiko asked, having followed, curious about what he was doing.

“The next class over. There’s a girl called Furu Shinomiya there. She may know something.”

“Huh? But you can’t get out, can you?”

“Not through the door, no.” Yuichi approached the window and opened it.

“Huh?! ...Actually, I guess this is what I’d expect from you...” Aiko seemed surprised at first, but moved immediately to acceptance.

He checked the athletic field again. They must have completely secured the area, because there were no monks there now.

Yuichi climbed out the window and steadied himself with finger strength alone. Then he jumped to the next classroom over, grabbed the windowsill, and stabilized himself again.

He peered into the classroom. Inside there were only the students and the teacher.

They seemed a little rattled, so the monk must have just finished his explanation.

Yuichi checked inside the classroom, but Furu wasn’t there.

If she was working with them, did they take her out somewhere?

He wondered what he should do. If this situation was related to the Evil God, his best move would be to head for the sacred territory, so he decided to move toward the roof.

There were plenty of handholds on the school’s exterior walls, including pipes, making it easy for someone with Yuichi’s prowess to climb, with the only snag being the lip around the edge of the roof.

Yuichi poked his head over the edge to size up the situation.

There was a large crowd of people there. It wasn’t just Bud-

dhist monks; there was a diverse crowd of people in religious attire.

A large altar-like object had also been assembled on the roof. Yuichi couldn't make out all the details, but the monks seemed to be moving restlessly around it.

The other thing that stood out was that part of the fence had been cut open, and an escape chute attached to it. The cloth tunnel was linking the roof to a window on the second floor.

He wondered why they couldn't just set up a ladder from below, but maybe it didn't work that way. Maybe you couldn't reach the sacred territory unless you came at it from above.

The monks were piling into the escape chute one after another.

Are these the Evil God specialists?

If so, Yuichi didn't mind leaving it to them, but he was concerned about the school being locked down like this. About half of the people who had been on the roof had ended up going down in the escape chute. The rest seemed to be preparing a ritual of some sort.

Yuichi spotted Furu Shinomiya among those still on the roof.

She was standing a ways away from the others, looking a bit like a loose end.

Yuichi slipped onto the roof, silenced his footsteps, and approached Furu from behind.

"Hey," he addressed her in a low voice.

"Huh?" Furu spun around quickly. "How did you get here? I thought there was strict security all the way up to the roof..."

“Can we talk?”

“All right. Let’s go somewhere they won’t see. I’m not in charge of anything, so they probably won’t notice I’m gone...”

Furu headed to the other side of the stairwell block, and Yuichi followed.

Once they were in a blind spot, Furu bowed to him. “I’m sorry.”

“So this *does* have something to do with you?”

“It does, in that they are the top-class monster hunters I called to seal the Evil God.”

“So what’s going on?” he asked.

“Um, sealing the Evil God requires a powerful spell, which in turn requires a huge catalyst...”

Yuichi inferred the rest from Furu’s hesitant behavior. “So they’re gonna sacrifice the people in the school? That’s crazy! There are over a thousand people in this school!”

“What else are they supposed to do? A thousand people isn’t much against the entire population of the world...”

It was such a huge issue, he could barely comprehend it. But Furu seemed to believe it, and they clearly were preparing for some kind of big ritual here on the roof.

“So what happens next?” he demanded.

“One group is going to invade the Evil God’s sacred territory. If they can stop it before it’s revived, this all ends without incident. But if it does revive, they’ll use the sealing ritual...”

She probably had no obligation to tell Yuichi this, as an out-

sider, yet she was being completely honest with him. Perhaps it was guilt.

“Well, he probably will revive,” Yuichi said.

Mutsuko would make sure that would happen. She was probably gleefully playing the villain role right about now. Yuichi could be sure of that.

“This is probably going to be really inconvenient to you, so let me apologize in advance,” he said. He’d just have to enter the sacred territory. Yuichi steeled his resolve and began walking forward.

“Hey, what are you doing? The entrance is heavily guarded!”

“I’m going to force my way through. If they’re willing to kill a thousand people, they can’t complain if I punch them a little.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about! They aren’t ordinary monster hunters! An ordinary high school student can’t possibly hope to—”

Furu apparently had no intention of trying to stop him by force, so Yuichi just ignored her and broke into a run. He didn’t want to get reckless about it, but he couldn’t afford to take his time, either.

There were three men standing guard over the chute. They were all wearing monk’s habits, which probably offered defense against magic attacks. They were also holding shakujo, ornate staves topped with brass rings.

Yuichi ran, his footsteps silent. They didn’t even notice him until he was in range.

The nearest monk tried to ready his shakujo, but Yuichi hit him with a forceful kick, hoping to send him flying.

The monk did indeed fly back, hit the other two, and send them sprawling.

Before they could recover, Yuichi dove into the escape tube.

* * * * *

Around that time, Mutsuko was walking around inside the sacred territory with two others.

Yuichi had been right that there were other ways to enter it.

The entrance they had used was available only to one who had collected all the Divine Vessels, and it took less effort to enter than jumping down from the roof.

The entrance was located among the trees in a park close to Seishin High. It would be hard to notice just at a glance.

The three were walking down a wooden hallway that seemed to go on forever. To the right were classrooms; to the left, windows. There seemed to be countless numbers of them.

It looked like Seishin High's old school building, but there was something odd about the layout.

The hallway kept turning right. It felt like they were walking in circles. It seemed hard to believe that such a structure could exist in reality, which suggested that they were definitely in some sort of alternate dimension.

“Hey! Hey! What are you gonna wish for? I wonder if he can really grant anything! The usual wish is to wish for more wishes, of course!” Mutsuko walked out in front of Hiromichi and peered into his face.

Four drones hovered around her. They were on autopilot, pro-

grammed to maintain a certain distance around her at all times.

“My wish... is to... become a god... and destroy all of humanity,” Hiromichi said as he continued moving, stiffly.

It must have been hard for him to walk. His form had been warped, the result of his taking in all of the Divine Vessels.

The instant all the vessels had been collected, they had been absorbed into him, likely to signify that the war had ended and things were moving on to the next stage. He now had four eyes and six arms; he had grown wings and horns and even sensory organs that humans normally didn't have; his skin was black and scaled.

“What the heck? That's boring,” Mutsuko said coldly.

It was impressive bravado before the monstrous Hiromichi, whose entire body seemed to writhe.

“I mean, what's the deal? I know he hates his classmates and all, but it's a little twisted to try to destroy all of humanity just to get rid of them. Am I right?” Mutsuko added to Ende, the third member of their group.

“The more Divine Vessels he takes on, the more the Evil God encroaches upon his body and mind,” Ende explained. “When you're in that position, your wish ends up turning into ‘become the Evil God and destroy the world’... which means the pitch isn't a lie, see?”

“What?! That's total fraud! It's a con game!”

They said you could get whatever you wished for, but then they changed your wish. They'd make you want to destroy the world, so that would be all you could wish for. Which meant there was basically no point at all. Monika's wish to save her friend and Yuichi's wish to return Soul Reader never would have been

granted from the start.

“The Evil God has revived many times before, but the world hasn’t changed that much,” Ende said. “You could have predicted that, don’t you think?”

“Well, fine! Let’s just revive him and see what happens! Come on, chop-chop! If you take too long, you’ll get beaten before you transform!”

“Would you shut up?!” Hiromichi finally exploded.

“Well, look at that!” Mutsuko said triumphantly. “Up ’til now, you’ve been all looming and impressive and talking in a halting tone of voice, but the minute you have a complaint, you suddenly talk normally! So, what about the ritual? Shouldn’t we be doing something special?”

“No. This path is laid out in a spiral, so we’ll just keep walking until we reach the center,” Ende explained. “That’s all it takes. This school building is steeped in long-seated grudges, so we’ll bathe in those as we walk.”

“That’s boring, too! Couldn’t you carve out someone’s heart like the Aztecs did, or light a big bonfire on an altar or something?”

“If that was what it took, it would be your heart that got dug out.”

“By the way, what’s with this school building?” Mutsuko said. “It doesn’t seem like a part of Seishin High...”

“It was a while before your time, but quite a lot of people died here,” Ende answered. “The incident wasn’t made public, but if you’re interested, you can try to read up on it. Knowing you, you could probably uncover it.”

“Assuming you survive,” she added in a whisper.

The three of them continued walking, but the scenery was so monotonous that Mutsuko eventually began to complain again. “I’ve gotta say, I’m getting pretty sick of this. I’m gonna feel like a big idiot if Yu doesn’t come.”

“Yuichi is heading this way right now. Though it may take him quite a while to get here.” Ende had a paperback in her hand that she was reading from. This was Ende’s ability: she could read about all kinds of events, summarized for her in book form.

Obviously the books couldn’t write down literally everything, so some things did get omitted. But it was a useful ability to watch large transitions taking place.

“But another event is about to begin, so I don’t think you’ll be bored for long,” Ende continued. With that, she pointed ahead of her.

A dead end could be seen at the end of the curving hallway. There was a sliding door there which looked just like one of the classroom doors.

“Finally!” Mutsuko was about to run eagerly out, but Ende grabbed her hand and stopped her.

“There are enemies waiting for us inside. I’ll be fine, but they can easily kill you.”

“Enemies?! What kind? Allies of justice who’ve assembled to stop the Evil God’s resurrection?! Ura-koya? The Burial Agency? Vatican Section XIII? The Gamboze? The Taimanin? I love it! Okay, Rokuhara! Run in there and give ’em hell!”

Mutsuko wasn’t sure if he had heard her, but Rokuhara, whose body was still changing, proceeded forward, nearly dragging himself.

With trembling hands, he opened the door.

The moment he did, gunshots rang out.

Chapter 7: Who Cares if You're a God?

They could feel a hideous, nauseating miasma drawing near.

It grew thicker as time passed, suggesting that the evil presence was gradually increasing in power. In other words, they could tell that the Evil God's resurrection was nigh.

They'd had time to prepare. The fact that they had secured the sacred territory's core first should give them a significant advantage.

It was a round, open area made of stone, about 20 meters in diameter and completely empty, with two doors and nothing more. One door was the entrance they had used to come in; the other was the one the evil emanated from.

They were able to lie in wait for the Evil God to arrive.

They might be able to finish him off before he resurrected.

They weren't going to let their guard down, of course, but they had hope.

They didn't want to sacrifice innocent people, either; if they could stop his resurrection here and now, that would be for the best.

The Evil God was now close.

They held their breath, watching the door.

After a while, the sliding door opened.

The darkness was there.

To their spiritually sensitive sight, it seemed there was something pulsing in the darkness.

They opened fire.

They first focused as many attacks as they could on him from long range. They were using assault rifles. Whether monster or evil god, if it still had a physical form, physical attacks would work.

They were using silver bullets that had been blessed by the clergy, so they could count on them doing spiritual damage, too. Of course, distance diminished the spiritual energy of the user, so they didn't think this barrage would completely finish it.

If they could just shave down the Evil God's defenses a bit, they could use divine tools that channeled chi to deal the finishing blow, or they might need to directly channel exorcism power into a barefisted strike.

The bullets hit their target. They weren't deflected; they plunged into the Evil God's twisted, foul body, causing blood to erupt and flesh to go flying.

"It's working! Keep it up!"

Following their leader's order, the monster hunters increased their force. But the Evil God did not stop walking. It moved slowly but steadily towards the center of the room.

The attacks had definitely had an effect, but they hadn't finished it.

Was it time to switch to direct attacks?

Just as they were beginning to wonder, a change began to occur.

The Evil God was growing.

It was swelling.

Just as they saw where this was going, the Evil God exploded. It had swelled like a balloon, and then burst.

“Did we... beat it?” one of them asked.

Blood and flesh were scattered like a mist, and the Evil God himself was nowhere to be seen. It seemed possible that he really had been destroyed.

But they weren't about to be so optimistic. The Evil God's presence had not vanished. On the contrary, its miasma had swelled explosively.

The bloody mist began to settle, revealing three humanoid forms.

One was the boy who had been the Evil God's host, Hiromichi Rokuhara.

One was an eyeless woman with the lower half of a snake.

One was a slender man with wings.

“Three of them?” The commander was hesitant. If the Evil God had revived, that meant they were finished. He hadn't had to think any further than that, but he was still surprised to see multiple figures there.

“I see! When you just stuck them all on one person it looked awful, and I honestly had no idea what it was getting at. So it's a trinity thing, huh?” A red-haired girl spoke as she entered through the door behind the Evil God.

The Evil God apparently had companions. But they didn't have time to worry about that now.



They had to do something about the Evil God. Even if they had no chance of winning, they had to at least try to do some damage.

“Hey, did you shoot something enchanted at us? That really hurt.” Hiromichi did not hide his anger.

“Focus your attacks on the boy! Everyone, switch to melee combat!” The commander unsheathed a katana.

The monster hunters each cast their assault rifles aside and drew the enchanted weapons that they specialized in.

Hiromichi disappeared, then reappeared abruptly in front of a monk. The monk hit Hiromichi with a vajra.

“Yeah, I can tell you have quite a bit of spiritual power, but that doesn’t hurt at all,” Hiromichi said.

The monk shouted out, panicked, and struck at him again and again. Hiromichi didn’t even bother to dodge.

“So that’s our endurance. What about our offense?” Hiromichi waved his hand lightly. It was enough to send the monk’s head flying.

“Dammit! Erect a barrier! I’ll use Dimension Cutter!” The commander had determined that attacking alone wouldn’t do anything. He hadn’t even been able to perceive Hiromichi’s movement.

“Sure, bring it on. Sounds like a good test.” Hiromichi smiled confidently and beckoned him.

If he was underestimating them, that was to their advantage, the commander thought. If he took them for total fools, they might stand a chance. He charged forward before Hiromichi could change his mind, brandished his sword, then swung it down.

Hiromichi didn't dodge.

The commander's victory was assured. Dimension Cutter could cut through anything, no matter how sturdy it might be.

But Hiromichi had blocked the blade.

"What?!"

"Heh. So it can cut through anything, huh? Pretty amazing... But it needs to be a Japanese sword? Too bad. That's in violation of the Swords and Firearms Control Law." Hiromichi laughed as if he found something very funny. "You want an explanation? I stole your ability. I mean, if you could have hit me before I'd stolen it, you might have won, but..."

Hiromichi snatched his sword away. The commander couldn't stop him; the boy was far too strong.

Hiromichi gave the sword a test swing. He didn't have any real swordplay training. He was just swinging it randomly, yet with one cut, he bisected the commander.

"He was so brittle, I didn't even need to use the ability," Hiromichi lamented.

Despite seeing the most powerful among them — their commander — defeated, the remaining monster hunters kept up their morale. But to Hiromichi, the remainder were just cannon fodder. His expression immediately shifted to one of boredom.

"I guess you all had better die." Hiromichi's left hand glowed. He swept it sideways, releasing a flash.

The upper torsos of all the monster hunters present went scattering.

The Evil God's power was overwhelming.

Perhaps that meant his resurrection was complete. But despite that, it had to be said that there was still something petty and human about his behavior.

"Ah, this isn't good," he muttered. "If I don't find a way to hold back, Yuichi Sakaki will just crumple immediately..."

Ende could see nothing godlike in his smug behavior. "There's a little too much Hiromichi Rokuhara in you to make me think the Evil God has really awakened... is it just my imagination?"

Ende approached. The slender man and the snake-woman remained still, so she walked past them to approach Hiromichi.

"Hmm? Oh, I'm not Hiromichi Rokuhara. It's just that I have no distinct personality of my own," he said. "I'm nothing but the will to eradicate humanity. I need a foundation to build on, or I'll lack the self-determination to carry out that will."

It seemed the host had an influence on the Evil God's resurrection. Ende found that convenient enough for her purposes; the Evil God himself would have no reason to fight Yuichi. It was extremely possible that immediately after awakening, he'd start acting to carry out humanity's destruction. But Hiromichi had a grudge against Yuichi, and if influenced by Hiromichi, the Evil God would probably want to defeat him.

"By the way, how are you going to wipe out humanity?" Ende asked casually. "The fight earlier proved that you're certainly strong, but I'm sure you don't intend to just go around killing people one at a time."

"Certainly not. But exterminating humanity has become comparatively easy these days, don't you think? They've created the

means for it entirely by themselves. I just need enough power to get in and make use of those means.”

Weapons of mass destruction, perhaps? The fact of the matter was that humanity, right now, was standing upon thin ice.

Peace was maintained by the fact that the world’s great nations all had weapons pointed at each other, but a single mistake could tip the balance and set off a chain reaction of retaliation. That was probably what the Evil God was referring to.

“Anyway, I really need you to die,” he continued.

This was a possibility Ende hadn’t ever considered. She couldn’t die, and the Evil God had no reason to kill her; that was what she had assumed.

But suddenly, her chest felt very hot. It took Ende a few moments to remember what that sudden feeling was: pain.

She checked.

The sword Hiromichi had been holding was sticking out of her chest.

“Yeah, looks like Dimension Cutter did the job.”

The sword was pulled out of her.

Ende backed away.

“You Outers seem to fancy yourselves gods, but to me, you’re just a part of the same humanity that needs eradicating. Obviously, I’m going to kill you if I have the chance.”

This future shouldn’t have existed, Ende thought. This completely unforeseen development left her feeling totally adrift.

The room spun around her, followed by a sensation like plung-

ing backwards into darkness.

“I forcibly narrowed down the possibilities.” The one who said that was one of the Evil God’s bodies, which had not made one move up until this point. It was the slender man.

“My, my. You look so shocked. After all this, are you truly afraid of death?” That teasing voice came from the half-snake woman with no eyes.

Ende typically claimed that she was bored of living, but the truth was, she felt very differently when death was there, staring her in the face.

“Whew... well, it is a little shocking,” she bluffed as she backed off further. “I’ve gotta say, it’s scarier than I was expecting...”

Fortunately, he had missed her heart; piercing a lung was a serious injury, but it would take more than that to kill an Outer for good.

Still, she would only survive until his next attack. Now that she knew what the Evil God could do, there didn’t seem to be much hope for escape.

Just as she was about to give up, a drone interposed itself between the Evil God and Ende.

“Run!”

As Mutsuko shouted, the drone lit up. It let out a flash of light directed at the Evil God.

Ende ran for the door opposite the one she had come in from.

“Tch!” The Evil God snapped his tongue, annoyed.

It was a simple move, but it had been surprisingly effective.

“Hey, everyone knows that the Taiyo-ken works even on top-tier enemies!” Mutsuko boasted.

Ende hesitated for a moment, wondering if it was all right to leave Mutsuko there. But even if she stayed, there was nothing she could do in her current condition.

She ran out the door.

* * * * *

Yuichi righted himself in the thick cloth tube and arrived on the second floor in a snap.

He found two people lying there, likely a part of the group of the monster hunters from before. There were no external injuries, but they seemed to be dead.

“Did you guys do this?” he asked.

There were specters wandering around the old classroom, though not as many as there had been the last time he was there. When they saw Yuichi, they scattered like ants. They must have remembered the way he’d torn through them last time.

He checked behind him and saw no sign of pursuers, so he walked out of the classroom.

A long wooden hallway extended before him. It was definitely a different layout than the school buildings at Seishin High, but he could tell right away which way to go. He just had to follow the fresh footprints.

Yuichi continued on, smashing the occasional specter that attacked.

The hallway curved, making it hard for him to see very far

ahead. Not only was the layout different from the one at their school, it seemed like it couldn't possibly exist in their world.

As he walked, he saw more signs of blood and rust and burn marks, and the otherworldly atmosphere grew stronger.

Am I walking in a spiral? It's a one-way road, but how do I know which classroom is the way out?

The hallway had been curving right the entire time. There was probably something at the center of the spiral, he thought.

As he walked on, he caught sight of a figure writhing in pain.

It seemed like it must be one of the monster hunters who had come in before him. If the man was still alive, Yuichi couldn't just abandon him.

Yuichi approached, but his eyes opened wide as he recognized the person — the last person he would have expected to see here.

“Hey.” Ende looked up, her face contorted in pain.

Her dress was stained with blood, and she appeared to be injured. He didn't see Hiromichi or Mutsuko nearby, so he wondered suspiciously what Ende was doing here by herself.

“I came here because you said it would be the final battle. What the hell is going on?” he demanded.

Of course, ever since entering high school, he hadn't understood most of the things he'd gotten involved in. Maybe it was a bit late to talk about that.

“Ha ha ha, it kinda stinks,” Ende said weakly. “I got betrayed.”

She didn't seem to be lying, so this probably wasn't a trap.

“Was it my sister?” Yuichi asked.

“You go right to suspecting your own sister? You can be surprisingly cruel.”

“I never know when it comes to her.”

“I got stabbed by the revived Evil God. I guess I really am just a god in name only... this is where that Outer overconfidence gets you.”

“Are you okay?” Yuichi knelt down next to Ende.

He rolled up her shirt to look at the place the blood was coming from. She seemed to have been stabbed on her right side, just above her breast. The wound already seemed to be clotting (perhaps because she was an Outer), but she should probably still take it easy for a while.

“You just perform sexual harassment at the drop of a hat, huh?” Ende asked.

“Do you get mad every time a doctor sees a woman naked? It’s like that, okay?”

“Well, I could be pretty bold in my day. I won’t make a fuss.”

“Will it heal?” he asked.

“Yeah. I feel pretty bad, but it’ll heal in time. Hey, do you mind if I give you a little warning?”

“What the heck? Are we friends now?” Yuichi snorted.

“I guess it would seem abrupt to you, but I’ve been watching you in action for a while, and I’m a fan.”

“A fan wouldn’t do all this crap to get me into trouble.”

“Sure they would,” Ende replied. “If you have a comic about an invincible hero, what kind of fan wants to read about them just

puttering around the house all day? They want him to fight powerful enemies and get out of jams, right?”

“I’m really sick of having everything compared to a story,” Yuichi shot back.

Even if the worlds they lived in really were stories, what did that matter? It wouldn’t change a thing about how Yuichi did things. The nature of their world meant nothing.

“You’re cut off from Mutsuko Sakaki’s world right now,” Ende told him. “Which means you no longer receive the blessings of a worldview where the things little brothers do always go the way their big sisters plan them. If you go now, you’ll be killed helplessly.”

“Didn’t you want me to get killed? Maybe he did betray you, but if I lose, that still suits your objective, doesn’t it?”

“To be honest, I’ve kinda stopped caring about that,” Ende said. “I talk about how I’m bored and have nothing to do, yet here I am on the brink of death. The world is still full of unknown things. It makes me think, I have better things to do than to play around with high school students. Besides, I owe Mutsuko.”

“What happened?” he asked.

“I was about to be killed, and Mutsuko saved me. That’s why I’m warning you: You can’t win as you are right now. If you go back now, you might survive. Take a few people you want to protect and get out of the school.”

“Give me a break,” Yuichi spat. If he’d been willing to do something like that, he wouldn’t have come here in the first place. Besides, if what she said was true, running away would mean abandoning his sister. Yuichi couldn’t even think of doing that.

“Well, I sorta figured you’d say that.”

“Then why did you bother?”

“Because you can’t win,” Ende said. “One last warning: just because you’ll run into Mutsuko up ahead doesn’t mean you’ll be returned to her worldview right away. So don’t count on that.”

Yuichi couldn’t even comprehend Ende’s warning. She was talking about him being torn out of Mutsuko’s worldview, but he hadn’t noticed any signs of that happening. He certainly didn’t feel any weaker.

“What about Rokuhara?” Yuichi asked. “Did he get his wish?”

Supposedly, the Evil God could grant any wish. It seemed impossible, but if it was that powerful, then he didn’t stand a chance.

“Hiromichi? He’s dead.”

“What, was his wish to rest in peace or something?” Yuichi asked dubiously.

“His wish was to become the Evil God and destroy the world. That wish was granted. The Evil God has manifested using his body as a host.”

“I didn’t realize he was so mad at the world,” Yuichi said. He’d seemed like a real jerk to Yuichi, certainly, but he hadn’t thought the guy would go that far.

“The more Divine Vessels he took into his body, the greater his urge for destruction grew,” Ende said. “Their influence made him long for the destruction of humanity. That’s apparently how it works.”

“So that’s the gimmick, huh? What a con game...”

The god couldn’t just break a promise, so he’d used a technicality to get around it. But that meant that Monika’s wish couldn’t

be granted, and neither could Yuichi's original wish, to get rid of Soul Reader.

"Heh. Mutsuko said the same thing. I guess siblings really do think alike..."

Yuichi felt a little annoyed by the comparison, but this did make it sound like the Evil God wasn't omnipotent. *After all, if he was omnipotent, he wouldn't have been sealed in the first place.*

If he was truly omnipotent, humanity would have been destroyed a long time ago. Which meant Yuichi had some hope of fighting him.

"If I keep going, will I run into the Evil God?" Yuichi asked.

"Yeah. It's a one-way road. There's a door at the end of it. I don't think he came out after me, so he's probably still there."

"I'll go, but what will you do?" Yuichi felt a little hesitant to leave her here all alone. As an Outer, she might be okay, but he still felt obligated to ask.

"I think I might show you the way," Ende said. "I tried to run away, but I really do want to see how it ends."

"Fine. I don't know how it'll turn out, but just stay in a corner."

Yuichi pulled Ende onto his back. She had a small frame, so she wasn't much of a burden.

Yuichi resumed walking down the spiral corridor.

As he walked, Ende told him everything she knew about the Evil God. He was skeptical about any information given to him by her, but it still seemed worthwhile to keep it in mind.

Eventually he arrived at the end of the hall.

There was a door there — an ordinary sliding door like one you might see in any classroom. Yuichi opened it and came out into a ringed room.

It was the opposite of the hall he had been walking in: the walls and floor were made of stone, and in its extravagance and tranquility, it did seem worthy of the name “sacred territory.” But it was also filled with the smell of blood.

Perhaps this was natural in the Evil God’s realm, but there were also dead bodies scattered all around them. Most of them were deformed, with nothing but a lower half.

“I’m so tired of waiting! There’s nothing here! What could he even be doing?” He could hear Mutsuko’s voice coming from the center of the room.

Straight ahead of him, in the middle of the room, Mutsuko was bound to a cross.

“What are you doing, Sis? Did you get betrayed or something?” Yuichi demanded.

Her hands, feet, and torso were bound with chains, and she was covered in blood, suggesting she had been beaten.

Three figures stood in front of the cross, presumably the Evil God.

Hiromichi Rokuhara, carrying a katana.

A slender man with wings.

An eyeless woman who was a snake below the waist.

A threatening aura hung around each of them.

“I forgot to mention this, but the Evil God is a trinity now,” Ende said from where she clung to his back.

“Yeah, I got that.” Yuichi set Ende down. It might be dangerous for her inside the room, but if she wanted to see how things turned out, this was her only choice. “Hey, why did you tie up my dumb big sister?”

“Did you just call me dumb, Yu?! That’s such a dumb thing to say!” Mutsuko shot back. She didn’t have her usual forcefulness, perhaps because she knew she was responsible for the mess she was in.

“I did think it might be funny if she was dead by the time you got here,” Hiromichi said. “But I thought that if you arrived here and still couldn’t save her, that would cause even deeper despair. Don’t you?”

The entity had Hiromichi’s face and spoke with his voice, but Ende had said that Hiromichi was dead, and that this was the Evil God, whose personality was merely influenced by the boy that they had known.

Yuichi had been thinking of his fight against the Evil God as a grudging inevitability. The lives of the people in his school were on the line, and given the way things had gone, he couldn’t just abandon them. He had been acting mostly out of a sense of duty.

But now it was different. The moment he had seen his sister there, bound up and listless, this had become Yuichi’s personal fight.

He was angry.

He was going to crush the ones who had done this to his big sister. He made that decision in an instant.

With perfectly natural steps, Yuichi began walking towards Hiromichi.

“I recall you had a run-in with my avatar before. Are you planning on using the same move twice?” the Evil God asked.

The three of them shared the avatar’s memories. They remembered what Yuichi had done the last time.

“Hmm, you really seem to be mad,” he added.

Yuichi wasn’t trying to hide his anger, but he also wasn’t acting recklessly; his every move conveyed calm. Of course, nothing he did would work on them. Yuichi seemed to have confidence in his speed, but they could just steal that ability away from him.

Yuichi was in Skill Eater range.

They activated Skill Eater.

Yuichi’s fist was in their gut.

“Huh?”

They couldn’t steal the skill.

Their defenses had been breached.

They didn’t understand.

They had tested their defensive prowess earlier; no matter how many times they were attacked, they shouldn’t even be able to feel pain. Yet Hiromichi’s body, as part of the Evil God, staggered in pain.

“What the hell is a ‘skill,’ exactly? If you’re talking about a technique, that’s not something you can take from a person,” Yuichi said, answering the question in the Evil God’s mind.

“Dammit!” The Evil God swung the sword.

It was Dimension Cutter. There was no defense that could stop this skill. It would work flawlessly against any opponent.

But Yuichi ducked and dodged it, and lashed out with his foot at the same time.

Hiromichi’s hand couldn’t withstand the force, and the katana went flying.

Glassy-eyed, the Evil God looked at Hiromichi’s fingers, which were bent in impossible directions.

“So what if you can cut through anything? Most swords will already kill you if they hit you, just like bullets,” Yuichi said.

Yuichi’s strength defied common sense.

This was impossible.

The Evil God was confused.

Even if they had taken on vulgar priorities from their blending with Hiromichi, a god was still a god. They couldn’t possibly be beaten by a human. Yet the Evil God couldn’t keep up with Yuichi’s movements.

They formed a fist with Hiromichi’s broken fingers and swung as hard as they could. It was a powerful enough blow to knock a person’s head off. Once it hit, it would be over.

But Yuichi didn’t dodge it. He stepped straight forward and struck with his fingers straight out, a piercing blow.

Yuichi’s arm moved forward, past Hiromichi’s strike, and kept going.

Hiromichi’s knees buckled; just making contact with Yuichi

had thrown him off balance.

Yuichi plunged his outstretched fingers into Hiromichi's chest. Breaking through the breastbone, his fingers dug into the body's heart and snatched out the core that lay within.

"Not this one, huh?" Yuichi said, crushing the core before immediately disappearing from Hiromichi's sight.

The flagstones shattered with an explosive sound.

The Evil God tried to use the snake-woman's pit organ to seek out Yuichi's location, but it was no use.

The snake-woman had already been cleaved in half, the core inside her stomach sliced through.

The Evil God looked at Yuichi through the winged man's eyes.

Yuichi had already made his attack.

A sharp blade was protruding from the winged man's back. A blade that had sprung out from Yuichi's elbow had speared him through the heart.

It had skewered the true core that controlled the trinity.



* * * * *

“What the heck happened?” Ende gazed, dumbstruck, as she watched Yuichi unchain Mutsuko.

Without being under Mutsuko’s influence, Yuichi shouldn’t have had the abilities to do the things she wanted him to. Even now, there should be no shared worldview effects between the two of them.

Yet Yuichi had dispatched the Evil God with ease.

The fact that he had crushed its core meant that it would never revive again.

The Evil God was now dead.

And Yuichi and Mutsuko were approaching.

The next thing she knew, Ende was walking the spiral corridor towards the exit.

“What’s going on here?” Ende came back to herself and asked Mutsuko, who was walking beside her.

Yuichi was walking a little ways ahead of them, perhaps as a security measure.

“Oh, that?” Mutsuko asked. “It was one of those shonen manga ‘my true power has been sealed’ things, of course!”

“Huh?”

“Yu’s a... what-do-you-call-it... natural talent.”

“Um, that’s seriously not enough explanation...” Ende said.

He clearly did have natural talent, but it was impossible to think that it would be enough to defeat a god.

“Here’s how I saw it!” Mutsuko declared. “If I raised him to just be able to do anything with ease, he wouldn’t turn out very good, right? People have to work as hard as they can, grit their teeth, face setbacks, and rise again! And since that’s what I thought, that’s how it turned out!”

The worldview of a Worldview Holder was greatly influenced by that person’s thoughts and wishes. This was probably why Mutsuko’s worldview was “An Unforgiving World That Rewards Only Effort.”

“I can’t accept it!” Ende burst out. “‘Natural talent’ beat the ‘Protagonist’ of a story? It defeated an evil god who’s been around since the dawn of civilization?!”

“Actually, you can use Soul Reader, right?” Mutsuko said. “What did it say when you looked at Yu?”

“It just said ‘Yu’! It didn’t mean anything!”

“That’s how you see him when I’m the central figure, right? What about from other points of view?”

Ende activated Soul Reader and looked at Yuichi, who was walking ahead of them. Unlike Yuichi’s Soul Reader, Ende’s was complete. She could turn it on and off freely, and see more detailed information.

The words over Yuichi’s head now said: “The Last One Standing: Humanity’s Line of Defense. Guardian of the human-centric world we currently live in. He fights against those who attempt to upend the world order and rework it to be centered around gods and mythical creatures.”

“That’s way too big! What the heck?!” Ende exclaimed.

“Gods, yokai, monsters, fantasy world people... those are all impossible daydreams created by the imaginations of totally ordinary humans,” Mutsuko said. “They wouldn’t exist if there were no humans around. In their own mythologies, they existed before humans did... but could they continue to exist if humans went away? Are they really that stable?”

“So Yuichi has the power to deny their existence?” Ende asked.

“It’s not anything quite that grand, I don’t think. Say there’s a world where people can use magic, and one where people can’t. What happens if the two bump into each other?”

“You end up with a world conflict. The two fuse, with the weaker world absorbed by the stronger. In most cases, the more special world is more powerful. So if that happened, the magic world would overwrite the normal one.”

“Yeah. It might seem that way at a glance, and Yu doesn’t deny the existence of gods, yokai, or magic either. But it’s not all as one-way as you’d think. Fusion means the two worlds mix together to create a new world. And Yu doesn’t think for a second that there could ever be an enemy he can’t beat.”

“You mean... Yuichi Sakaki has created a world where he’s invincible?”

“Not quite that far,” Mutsuko said. “But he can make sure there’s always a chance that he can win. And if there’s a chance that he can win, he *will* win!” Mutsuko’s confidence seemed to be eternal and absolute.

“What the heck...? Then what’s the point of the Unforgiving World That Rewards Only Effort?” Ende complained.

Ende had assumed that worldview was the reason Yuichi

Sakaki was so strong. In a world where those who put in effort were the strongest, he could always beat those who didn't put in effort.

"That's so he'll train!" Mutsuko declared. "And when he's unleashed, his effort combines with his natural talent and makes him even stronger!"

"You make it sound so simple..." Ende still couldn't really accept it, but since Yuichi Sakaki really had won, she had little choice but to do so. "Well, I still have questions, but fine, I guess. So what are you, Mutsuko Sakaki? Why do you know all this? Why did you push that over-the-top training on him?"

"Ha ha! If we ever get a second season, I'll tell you then!" Mutsuko then ran up to Yuichi, leaving Ende befuddled. "I can't believe you used the saber, Yu! I'm so happy! I just knew you've wanted to use it since the first time I showed it to you!"

"Shut up! I didn't know what I was gonna be facing down here, so I just decided to take all the most dangerous stuff I could carry!"

The weapon that Mutsuko had created, called a saber, was affixed to Yuichi's forearm. It was a blade that traced up his forearm all the way to his elbow, and flipped open when triggered. He'd apparently come here with it equipped, and used it to finish off the Evil God.

"Aww, why are you taking it off?" Mutsuko complained. "There's no need to be bashful!"

"It's in the way! It's still non-retractable!"

Yuichi stripped the annoying saber off his arm and threw it onto the ground.

Epilogue: Yuichi's Battles Really Will Continue, Apparently

After that, everything to do with the Evil God was easily resolved.

Yuichi had assumed Hiromichi Rokuhara was dead, but he'd come back to life as part of the Evil God trinity. And when the core was destroyed, he had resurrected as a human.

He didn't have any more of the Evil God's power other than being a little tougher than an ordinary human. He was now extremely afraid of Yuichi, and probably wouldn't try anything else after this.

The Divine Vessels had died with the Evil God, which also meant that the Divine Vessels War was over forever.

Ryoma Takei had lost all his power and was now hospitalized.

"In the old days, he might have been able to make a comeback. But not now," Ende had said. "No readers are gonna want to hear about someone who lost that badly. He's a failure as a protagonist. I feel a little responsible for his condition, so maybe I'll look after him."

Despite that, she didn't really seem all that bothered by his circumstances. She really was a total creep.

At the school, the nonexistent "violent killer" was "arrested," and the men who called themselves officers of the peace departed.

In the end, the worst that happened was that afternoon classes had gotten a little disrupted. Still, perhaps just for caution's sake, they had been given a day off from school.

Given that the human race had nearly gone extinct, things had been kept pretty small-scale, all in all.

Meanwhile, the students, as usual, couldn't keep their attention focused for long on things that were resolved, especially with second term finals about to start soon.

Yuichi was walking to school with Aiko as always. "I think I might finally be free from all the weird stuff!" he declared, feeling pretty elated.

"Really? I have my doubts about that..." Aiko responded, looking seriously dubious.

"Well, it'd be too much to expect *everything* to go away at once, but at least with Soul Reader gone, I probably won't get involved in any *new* weird stuff..." Fortunately, even after Yuichi had beaten Hiromichi, the Soul Reader that had been stolen hadn't returned.

"Um, I have a feeling Soul Reader wasn't really responsible for any of this..." Aiko murmured.

"Really? I think it probably was—" Yuichi stopped as his eyes fell on a strange figure ahead of them.

It was a woman in an extravagant kimono, her hair full of traditional hairpins and decorated with flowers. Despite the winter cold, her kimono hung off her shoulders in an alluring way.

And she didn't seem to be Japanese. Her eyes were blue, and her features seemed Western, too.

"Hey, don't make eye contact with weirdos!" Yuichi warned

Aiko, his voice low but clear.

The people on their daily commutes were giving the woman a wide berth, perhaps sensing that she was someone who might be dangerous to get involved with.

“Huh? But she’s staring at me really hard...” Aiko said.

It was no use. It would take severe willpower to ignore the woman after this.

“Mistress, it has been far too long since we last met.” The courtesan-like woman approached Aiko, her eyes shining.

“Um, may I ask who you are?” Aiko asked. In response, the woman suddenly started crying, as if she’d suffered a terrible shock. “Um, uh, I’m sorry, but I really don’t know who you are...”

“No, no! It is perfectly natural that Mistress would not remember me. It is I who am the fool for being so upset by something so trivial.”

“Um, please don’t grovel... I feel terrible!”

There was a courtesan standing in the middle of the road, weeping and bowing to a high school girl during the morning commute. It was a truly strange sight, and Yuichi couldn’t help but feel like he’d gotten mixed up in something again.

“Um, I seriously don’t understand any of this, but could we at least go somewhere away from prying eyes?” Yuichi said, getting the sinking feeling that this wasn’t going to be resolved easily. It was probably impossible to just ignore her and run away, but at least they could go somewhere where they wouldn’t stand out.

“Mistress? What ails your livestock?” the courtesan said. “It appears to be speaking without your permission.”

“Huh? What the...” Aiko stared blankly as if she couldn’t even

understand what she was hearing.

“Did you choose him based on his appearance? Even so, he lacks discipline. I mean no offense to you by saying this, Mistress, but I believe he has little value as livestock. He is unworthy of you.” The woman’s expression suddenly shifted to a nightmarish one.

“Huh? What?” Yuichi didn’t know what to do about someone suddenly wanting to kill him for a reason he couldn’t understand. He was ready to deal with any danger at any time, but it was hard to keep his cool in the face of so sudden a shift.

“I am aware that it is impertinent for me to say this, but I cannot accept him by your side, Mistress!”

“Laura!” A dog cut in between the angry woman and Yuichi.

It was the wolfman, Nero, currently in his dog form.

“Oh? What are you doing here, Nero?” she sneered.

“Um, I have no idea what’s going on here. Can you please explain?” Aiko asked, bewildered.

“This is Laura. She is one of your retainers, Lady Aiko.”

“Oh, that’s right, I forgot I had those...” she muttered. He’d mentioned before that Aiko had twelve retainers.

“Yuichi! I shall hold things off here,” Nero barked. “Take Lady Aiko and go!”

“Well, if you insist. Let’s go!” Yuichi said.

“Huh? Are you sure we can just leave things like this?” Aiko protested.

“There’s not a huge difference between a courtesan bowing

and weeping before a high school girl and a courtesan fighting a dog.”

Yuichi decided to drag Aiko back the way they came and take a different route to school.

They arrived at school, and just as they were nearing their classroom, someone called out to Yuichi. It was Kogan Yanagisawa.

“I need to talk to you. Is that okay?”

“Oh, sure...” They’d never spoken before, but Yuichi had a feeling he knew what it might be about.

He thought back on what had happened in the classroom the other day — Yanagisawa must have noticed Yuichi throwing the tactical pen.

He let Aiko go on ahead and the two of them moved to a corner of the hallway. From here, as long as they kept their voices down, no one would be able to hear them.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” Yuichi asked.

“Chiharu Dannoura.”

“Wait, what?”

“You know her, right?”

“Sure I do, but what about her?”

“Break up with her.”

“Huh?” Yuichi was at a loss for how to respond.

“You know I love Chihiro!” the boy declared.

“No, I don’t! This is the first time I’ve ever talked to you! And I can’t break up with her, anyway!”

“I see... I’ll have to resort to force, then.” Yanagisawa’s eyes immediately narrowed. Yuichi felt his malice like a tangible thing.

“No, I don’t mean it like that!” he said impatiently. “I can’t break up because we’re not dating. We’re not romantically involved.”

“Really?!” Yanagisawa’s face lit up immediately. He was apparently the extremely simple type.

“What in the world made you think that we were?” Yuichi asked.

“Chiharu told me that you were in her harem.”

“That’s defamation of character. I’m inclined to sue.”

“I know you’re surrounded by women all the time. The thought of Chiharu ending up with a playboy like you... but I guess there’s no fear of that, right?”

“None at all. So, you and Dannoura know each other?”

“We were childhood friends,” Yanagisawa said. “Both our families run old dojos, and they get along.”

“Oh, well, I’ll do whatever I can to help!” Yuichi said.

It was annoying having Chiharu talking about him being in her harem. Maybe if he could get these two together, that would stop.

“Really? After I ambushed you? Wow, you must really be a good guy! I had no idea!”

“Well, we’d never talked, so I guess you wouldn’t.”

“Talk to you another time! I’d better go.” Yanagisawa left Yuichi and went back into the classroom.

“Well, I’m glad it wasn’t anything serious,” Yuichi whispered in relief.

A voice spoke up behind him. “It’s not happening, by the way.”

Yuichi looked in the direction of the voice. Ende was standing there, wearing the uniform of Seishin High School.

“Um, why are you here?” he asked.

“I transferred.”

“That was fast!”

“Well, it was easy enough.”

“So what did you mean, ‘It’s not happening’?”

“Events are going to unfold around the two of them so that Chiharu ends up fighting Yanagisawa... at least, that’s what it says in this book. Want to read it?” Ende offered him a paperback she was holding.

“One of your books about the future, huh? But it’s not set in stone, right?”

“Guess not. The smallest things can change the future, so they’re not actually that reliable.” But even as Ende said that, Yuichi couldn’t help but feel like it must be their destiny to fight.

As he was stewing over what to do, the warning bell for the start of class sounded, and Yuichi raced into the classroom.

During lunch break, Yuichi headed to the cafeteria to buy himself a meal.

He was buying some bread when he found Shota Saeki at his side.

“You didn’t bring a lunch, Saeki?” Yuichi asked.

“Nah... actually, I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Sure thing. What’s on your mind?”

Shota sat in the seat in front of Yuichi in class. The guy could probably talk to him at any time, so there was something strangely cryptic about his behavior.

Yuichi and Shota both bought bread and headed for the courtyard, where they found a bench and sat down.

“So, what is it?” Yuichi asked. “Something we can’t talk about in the classroom, I guess?”

“I’m not quite sure how to start. It might not make any sense, and you might think I’m crazy, but...”

“Go ahead, try me. You know how my sister is. I’m used to people saying crazy things. No matter how weird it is, I won’t make fun of you or anything without hearing the whole story.”

Shota was a pretty cheerful guy, but he wasn’t the type to make up something outrageous. Yuichi felt confident in promising that he could hear him out to the end.

“I was visited by aliens.”

“Uh?”

“You *are* making fun of me!”

“No, I wasn’t making fun, it was just a really surprising thing to hear,” Yuichi said. “Keep going.”

“Yesterday after we finished practice, aliens showed up on the field.”

“Okay, I’m not making fun of you, but what made you think they were aliens?”

“The UFO, I guess? They came in a flying saucer.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And then aliens came out.”

“What did they look like?”

“Just like Earthlings. Their skin was a little bluer, I guess. It was night, though, so I’m not totally sure.”

“And these aliens came all the way from space to visit Seishin High’s athletic field? What did they want?”

“Yeah, you *are* making fun of me!”

“No, I’m not. So, these aliens. What did they want?”

“Apparently they came to invade Earth.”

“Sounds like Earth’s done for, then,” Yuichi said. “I don’t know where they came from, but there’s no way we can fight anyone who has space travel technology.”

“Actually, from what they said, there’s a sort of space federation type of thing out there, and they’re a part of it, which means they’re forbidden from going to war. Instead, they want to settle it with a small-scale competition with a specific set of rules.”

“I feel like I’ve heard this somewhere before...”

“So now we need to play soccer against aliens,” Shota said. “I don’t know what to do. It feels weird having the fate of the Earth

riding on my legs.”

“Yeah, that sounds tough.” Yuichi didn’t know what else to say.

“Well, I really did meet aliens, but when I hear myself explain it, I’m not sure I believe it either. Thanks for hearing me out to the end anyway.” With that, Shota stood up. It seemed like getting to say it all aloud had let him sort it out in his mind.

“Hey, can I come to watch your match?”

“I’m not sure. They might not let outsiders watch...”

“In that case, could you put me on the team, even if it’s just as a reserve player?” Yuichi asked. “It’s not that I doubt you, I’m just curious.”

“Well, it’s not a regulation match, so there are no particular requirements on who can play. I’ll check.” With that, Shota left.

If yokai and gods existed, maybe it wasn’t that strange that aliens might exist, too, Yuichi thought.

As he was returning to his classroom, he was approached by a pale-looking Tomomi Hamasaki. “Terrible news! They’re holding the Fakes Grand Prix, and the prize is—”

“Nope, still don’t want to hear your story.”

“Hey! What do you mean? This time it’s serious! I need your help!”

“I’ll hear you out some other time.”

“You’d better! Come by my restaurant later!” Tomomi’s expression was more serious than he’d ever seen it. Yuichi made up his mind to stop by Nihao the China on the way home, then returned to his seat.

Just as he did, An Katagiri approached him. She must have been waiting for him to return.

“What is it, Katagiri?” he asked.

“May I have a moment?”

Not waiting for a response, An took Yuichi’s hand and dragged him against his will to the roof.

“What is it?” Yuichi asked once they were up there. “You don’t usually try to talk to me.”

“I can’t find Takuro! Do you have any idea where he might be?” He’d never seen An so flustered before.

Takuro Oda was Yuichi’s friend from middle school. He’d started dating An in high school, which had given them fewer chances to talk, but Yuichi still thought of him as a friend.

“Dunno. How long’s he been missing?” The guy hadn’t come to school today, but Yuichi hadn’t been terribly worried. He’d assumed he was just in bed with a cold or something.

“I haven’t been able to get in touch with him since last night,” An said. “More precisely, since 7:00 PM.”

“How do you know that?”

“I call him every hour on the hour. He answered the 6:00 call, but...”

“That’s a little scary, you know.”

“Have you heard from him?”

“No. Actually, you do magic, don’t you? Can’t you use that to find him? Spells for finding people and things are pretty typical, I thought.”

“You don’t think I’ve tried?”

“So you tried it, huh? Let’s see, then... Maybe he got sick of you and went to another witch for help? There’re these things called barriers that—”

“I’ll kill you.”

Tangible malice swelled in the air around him.

The “malice” that Yuichi felt was an expression of an opponent’s urge to kill. It was usually something he could read subtly from how someone was acting, but this was on a whole other level.

This was a pure, unequivocal desire for blood. Yuichi had no idea where it was coming from.

Man, she really is scary...

He didn’t think he’d lose if he had to fight her, but in a fight against vaguely defined magical abilities, he’d have to do a lot of fumbling around.

“But thank you, anyway,” An said, turning to leave. “I never considered that he might have found a way to escape my magic. I guess it’s a sign of how panicked I was.”

“Hey!” Yuichi called out to her.

“What?” she asked, turning around.

“If there’s anything I can do to help, let me know.”

“I thought you hated me.”

“Yeah, but this is about Takuro,” he said. “It’s different. Besides, I have a feeling that if I leave you to your own devices, a whole lot of people are going to die.”

“I see. I’ll think about it.” With that, An left.

Yuichi descended the stairs to return to his classroom, but as he got into the hallway, he was stopped by Yurika Maruyama.

“What is it, Maruyama?”

“Hey, wanna join my hero club?” Yurika asked abruptly.

“Huh? I thought you lost your Divine Vessel.” Yuichi had assumed she wouldn’t have any more power without it.

“Oh, my being a Hero has nothing to do with Divine Vessels,” she said. “Apparently it’s just a thing I was born with. I lost my Monk and my Goof-Off, so I’m down to a Hero and a Warrior. So I’m recruiting more party members!”

“Um, what does the ‘hero club’ do at school?” he hedged.

“We dungeon-dive and increase our levels!”

“Please ask someone else.” It sounded like a huge pain in the ass.

After class, he met up with Aiko and Natsuki to head for the club room. When they entered, they found Kanako Orihara slumped at the table. She seemed to be agonizing over something again.

“Is club off again today?” Yuichi asked trepidaciously.

“Oh, yes. It is. Your sister did come to school today, but she said she had something to take care of and went home early...”

“I see. Orihara, are you thinking up material for your novel?”

If she was, he didn’t want to get in her way. He was just about to turn and go when Kanako shook her head.

“Not today. There’s something else on my mind... can I tell you about it?”

“Sure, though I’m not sure we can be of any use,” Yuichi said.

“Um, my mother came home...”

He’d heard that Kanako got along very poorly with her mother, who had divorced her father and left home. Her mother was actually the reason she’d tried to kill herself a long time ago.

“Oh, it’s about your mother... what did she have to say? I thought she divorced your dad and left home a long time ago?”

This was sounding like it was going to be a really heavy conversation. The thought of it made Yuichi want to bolt.

“Actually... she told me she comes from an isekai!”

“...Uh?” Yuichi said in shock. This development was completely unexpected.

“I was really surprised!” Kanako cried.

“Yeah, I’m pretty surprised myself...”

“So am I,” added Aiko.

“Same,” Natsuki chimed in.

“Apparently she’s royalty, and people tried to kill her when she was very little, so she fled to this world!”

“And so she wanted to get it off her chest?” Aiko asked.

Yuichi was wondering the same thing.

“Apparently things have cooled off in her decades away, and now she wants to go home,” Kanako said. “She said she needs my

power to do it, though, so I'm not sure what to do..."

"I see," Yuichi said. "Um, I'm not sure if I can help with this... uh, but if it seems like I can, let me know. Though personally, I don't know a whole lot about isekais."

"Okay," Kanako said. "I'm sorry to tell you about something so strange. I'm going to stay here for a while and think, so you can all go home."

With Kanako's permission, Yuichi left.

"An isekai, huh? I wonder what it's like..." Aiko mused, sounding like she was turning over possibilities in her mind.

"I don't know. Well, I was worried when she brought up her mother, but I'm glad it wasn't anything too heavy."

"What if I were to tell you something heavy?" Natsuki asked.

"Where did that come from?" Yuichi asked.

"It's about what happened to me before I became like this. May I describe for you, in minute, poetic detail, the tale of a girl whose family was murdered, and who fell into the life of a serial killer?"

"Uh, I really wish you wouldn't..."

"I see." Natsuki sounded triumphant for some reason.

"Why are you acting so smug, Takeuchi?"

Yuichi reflected for a moment on the fact that they hadn't had any proper club meetings for a while. But then he reminded himself that their club meetings had never exactly been proper to begin with.

After club...

Natsuki headed for the station, and Yuichi and Aiko were walking home together.

They had to be careful because of what had happened that morning. They wanted to avoid running into that courtesan lady again. So they went home on a different path from usual, until eventually, they reached the residential district.

Aiko's house wasn't far away. But just when he was thinking it was safe, another woman appeared before them, different from the one from this morning.

"Hello. You're Yuichi Sakaki, aren't you?"

It was a student from his little sister Yoriko's middle school. He surmised that much from the fact that she was wearing the same sailor uniform.

"Yeah, who are you? A friend of Yori's?"

"My name is Akane Otori. And yes, though she's less my friend and more my rival. There's something I wanted to ask you about."

"What is it?" Yuichi asked. If she was a friend of Yoriko's, it would be hard to turn her down. He decided to hear her out, at least.

"Would you please go out with m—"

Just then, Yoriko came running up to them and blindsided Akane with a punch. Her continued momentum sent them both rolling together to the ground. They rolled all the way to a nearby open lot, and Yoriko straddled her, ready to pound on her.

"Stop!" Yuichi grabbed Yoriko's fist. He knew she was strong enough to kill her if she tried.

“Oh, Big Brother,” she said. “What is it?”

“That’s my line. What’s going on here?”

“I was thinking of making it so you’d never have to look at Akane’s face again.”

“I know you’re friends, but you should still choose your words better.”

“We are not friends!”

Yuichi put his arms around Yoriko’s waist and lifted her off of Akane. “If not, that goes doubly so.”

Yoriko acted very unsatisfied about being lifted, but she was also smiling happily.

“Let’s ask Akane, then,” Yoriko snapped. “What was all that about?”

“Oh, when I asked him to go out with me, I didn’t mean I wanted him to be my boyfriend. I meant that I wanted him to marry me.”

“That’s even worse!” Yoriko flailed her arms and legs in the air.

“I see. Then the Otori clan is after Yuichi Sakaki, as well.” Yuri Konishi appeared.

“What the heck is it now?” Yuichi exclaimed. One girl after another kept showing up. He was starting to feel dizzy.

“That person is the third daughter of the Otori family. The Otoris are chicken anthromorphs. Avians, you might say. Though in my opinion, they act a bit high and mighty for mere chickens...”

“Oh? What was that you said, peasant?” Akane spat. “Are you after Yuichi, too?”

“I beg your pardon,” Yuri shot back. “I am the closest woman in the world to Yuichi Sakaki! That means I am the closest to becoming heir to the Sumeragi family!”

It sounded like this was the heir-to-the-anthromorph-family-that-controls-Japan battle story. Now that he’d determined that, Yuichi moved quickly.

“Okay, let’s leave the anthromorphs to their business and head home!” Yuichi took Aiko and Yoriko and ran off.

Having finally made it home, Yuichi stomped up to his room and threw himself into bed.

“What is *with* today?!” It had been one strange story after another, and he was starting to feel incredibly drained.

“Yu!” Mutsuko arrived in Yuichi’s room. She must have gotten home a bit earlier than him.

“What?” Yuichi responded sulkily. He was really tired. He wished she would let him rest.

“I thought it was probably about time I let you know!” Mutsuko declared.

“About what?”

“About the catastrophe.”

“The hell is that?”

“There’s gonna be an ultimate catastrophe that’ll turn the world upside-down! All the training I’ve been giving you has been for that!”

“Huh? What did you say?” Yuichi was starting to wish he could pretend he hadn’t heard her.

“Killing that Evil God means you’ve come pretty far, but you’re not there yet! You need more training to get more power to become the man who can save the world. That’s right! I’ve biased you too much towards speed in the past! You need some muscle training, and weapons training, too! Oh, electronic warfare is gonna be important in the future, too. Of course, I can probably handle that part myself, but you should at least learn the basics! And—”

As usual, she was living in a fantasy world. Yuichi let it all go in one ear and out the other.

It seemed that even after losing Soul Reader, Yuichi’s days of normalcy weren’t going to return. If anything, things had actually gotten even worse.

Well, that’s just who my big sister is. Apparently, he’d just have to keep going along with her.

Letting out a sigh, Yuichi steeled himself for what was to come.

Afterword

Finally, it's the long-awaited seventh volume. This is also the end of part one, the Soul Reader Arc.

I haven't made any decisions about part two, but if you're patient, I might get a chance to announce it someday.

If there is a part two, I'd like to make it more of a school story or a comedy. It's technically a school story at heart, but they barely went to school at all in part one.

Anyway, I've published a *Big Sister Lives in a Fantasy World* side story called "Big Sistering to Win in a VRMMO" on *Shosetsuka ni Narou!*, so feel free to read it if you like. It was a story I had meant to include in volume five.

Um, there are only two chapters out as of this book's release, but I'll probably write more soon...

I'm also publishing a story called "My Instakill Cheat Is Too Strong and These Fantasy World Guys Don't Stand a Chance" on *Shosetsuka ni Narou*, so I hope you enjoy that.

This book makes my official tenth published work. It's a good time to look back on what I've done... and the memories are mostly pretty stressful.

I have another job, so I don't have a lot of time to write, and as my children get older, I have even less time.

If I could manage my schedule better, I'd probably be a little better off, but when I consider everything that happened, I think maybe I wasn't cut out to be a writer. I started it for fun, but it's

been harder than I could have ever imagined.

I have a lot to think about, but for a while, I want to get proper sleep and be a good father to my children.

Ah, I guess this has gotten a little depressing.

Maybe I should write more about things that made me glad I became a writer! Someone made an Aiko figure for Wonfes, and I got a sample. That made me very happy. This is the kind of thing that makes me glad to be a writer.

Also, let's see... I was able to buy more manga and games with the money.

I justified it with the fact that they were for reference and research, so I went a little crazy with the spending. Though I'm not sure if that was a good thing.

Now for the acknowledgments.

To my editor, I'm so sorry about everything being late all the time.

To An2A, who handled the illustrations, thank you for all the wonderful illustrations you provided.

And to all of my readers, thank you for coming with me all this way.

Well, that's that.

Hope to see you around again someday.

Tsuyoshi Fujitaka